

# JASPER FFORDE

THE EYRE AFFAIR  
LOST IN A GOOD BOOK  
THE WELL OF LOST PLOTS  
SOMETHING ROTTEN  
FIRST AMONG SEQUELS



A THURSDAY  
NEXT DIGITAL  
COLLECTION:  
NOVELS 1-5

**A Thursday Next Digital Collection:  
Novels 1-5**

The Eyre Affair  
Lost in a Good Book  
The Well of Lost Plots  
Something Rotten  
First Among Sequels

**Jasper Fforde**

P E N G U I N

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**The Eyre Affair**

**Lost in a Good Book**

**The Well of Lost Plots**

**Something Rotten**

**First Among Sequels**



*The Eyre Affair*

A NOVEL

**Jasper Fforde**



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

The Eyre Affair

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For my father  
John Standish Fforde  
1920-2000

Who never knew I was to be published but  
would have been most proud nonetheless  
--and not a little surprised.

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# 1.

## A Woman Named Thursday Next

... The Special Operations Network was instigated to handle policing duties considered either too unusual or too specialized to be tackled by the regular force. There were thirty departments in all, starting at the more mundane Neighborly Disputes (SO-30) and going onto Literary Detectives (SO-27) and Art Crime (SO-24). Anything below SO-20 was restricted information, although it was common knowledge that the ChronoGuard was SO-12 and Antiterrorism SO-9. It is rumored that SO-1 was the department that polices the SpecOps themselves. Quite what the others do is anyone's guess. What is known is that the individual operatives themselves are mostly ex-military or ex-police and slightly unbalanced. "If you want to be a SpecOp," the saying goes, "act kinda weird . . ."

MILLON DE FLOSS

--A Short History of the Special Operations Network

**M**Y FATHER had a face that could stop a clock. I don't mean that he was ugly or anything; it was a phrase the ChronoGuard used to describe someone who had the power to reduce time to an ultraslow trickle. Dad had been a colonel in the ChronoGuard and kept his work very quiet. So quiet, in fact, that we didn't know he had gone rogue at all until his timekeeping buddies raided our house one morning clutching a Seize & Eradication order open-dated at both ends and demanding to know where and when he was. Dad had remained at liberty ever since; we learned from his subsequent visits that he regarded the whole service as "morally and historically corrupt" and was fighting a one-man war against the bureaucrats within the Office for Special Temporal Stability. I didn't know what he meant by that and still don't; I just hoped he knew what he was doing and didn't come to any harm doing it. His skills at stopping the clock were hard-earned and irreversible: He was now a lonely itinerant in time, belonging to not one age but to all of them and having no home other than the chronoclastic ether.

I wasn't a member of the ChronoGuard. I never wanted to be. By all accounts it's not a huge barrel of laughs, although the pay is good and the service boasts a retirement plan that is second to none: a one-way ticket to anywhere and anywhen you want. No, that wasn't for me. I was what we called an "operative grade I" for SO-27, the Literary Detective Division of the Special Operations Network based in London. It's way less flash than it sounds. Since 1980 the big criminal gangs had moved in on the lucrative literary market and we had much to do and few funds to do it with. I worked under Area Chief Boswell,



a small, puffy man who looked like a bag of flour with arms and legs. He lived and breathed the job; words were his life and his love--he never seemed happier than when he was on the trail of a counterfeit Coleridge or a fake Fielding. It was under Boswell that we arrested the gang who were stealing and selling Samuel Johnson first editions; on another occasion we uncovered an attempt to authenticate a flagrantly unrealistic version of Shakespeare's lost work, *Cardenio*. Fun while it lasted, but only small islands of excitement among the ocean of day-to-day mundanities that is SO-27: We spent most of our time dealing with illegal traders, copyright infringements and fraud.

I had been with Boswell and SO-27 for eight years, living in a Maida Vale apartment with Pickwick, a regenerated pet dodo left over from the days when reverse extinction was all the rage and you could buy home cloning kits over the counter. I was keen--no, I was *desperate*--to get away from the Litera Tecs but transfers were unheard of and promotion a nonstarter. The only way I was going to make full inspector was if my immediate superior moved on or out. But it never happened; Inspector Turner's hope to marry a wealthy Mr. Right and leave the service stayed just that--a hope--as so often Mr. Right turned out to be either Mr. Liar, Mr. Drunk or Mr. Already Married.

As I said earlier, my father had a face that could stop a clock; and that's exactly what happened one spring morning as I was having a sandwich in a small cafe not far from work. The world flickered, shuddered and stopped. The proprietor of the cafe froze in midsentence and the picture on the television stopped dead. Outside, birds hung motionless in the sky. Cars and trams halted in the streets and a cyclist involved in an accident stopped in midair, the look of fear frozen on his face as he paused two feet from the hard asphalt. The sound halted too, replaced by a dull snapshot of a hum, the world's noise at that moment in time paused indefinitely at the same pitch and volume.

"How's my gorgeous daughter?"

I turned. My father was sitting at a table and rose to hug me affectionately.

"I'm good," I replied, returning his hug tightly. "How's my favorite father?"

"Can't complain. Time is a *fine* physician."

I stared at him for a moment.

"Y'know," I muttered, "I think you're looking younger every time I see you."

"I am. Any grandchildren in the offing?"

"The way I'm going? Not ever."

My father smiled and raised an eyebrow.

"I wouldn't say that *quite* yet."

He handed me a Woolworths bag.

"I was in '78 recently," he announced. "I brought you this."

He handed me a single by the Beatles. I didn't recognize the title.

"Didn't they split in '70?"

"Not always. How are things?"

"Same as ever. Authentications, copyright, theft--"

"--same old shit?"

"Yup." I nodded. "Same old shit. What brings you here?"

"I went to see your mother three weeks ahead your time," he answered, consulting the large chronograph on his wrist. "Just the usual--ahem--reason. She's going to paint the bedroom mauve in a week's time--will you have a word and dissuade her? It doesn't match the curtains."

"How is she?"

He sighed deeply.

"Radiant, as always. Mycroft and Polly would like to be remembered too."

They were my aunt and uncle; I loved them deeply, although both were mad as pants. I regretted not seeing Mycroft most of all. I hadn't returned to my hometown for many years and I didn't see my family as often as I should.

"Your mother and I think it might be a good idea for you to come home for a bit. She thinks you take work a little too seriously."

"That's a bit rich, Dad, coming from you."

"Ouch--that hurt. How's your history?"

"Not bad."

"Do you know how the Duke of Wellington died?"

"Sure," I answered. "He was shot by a French sniper during the opening stages of the Battle of Waterloo. Why?"

"Oh, no reason," muttered my father with feigned innocence, scribbling in a small notebook. He paused for a moment.

"So Napoleon *won* at Waterloo, did he?" he asked slowly and with great intensity.

"Of course not," I replied. "Field Marshal Blucher's timely intervention saved the day."

I narrowed my eyes.

"This is all O-level history, Dad. What are you up to?"

"Well, it's a bit of a coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

"What is?"

"Nelson and Wellington, two great English national heroes *both* being shot early on during their most important and decisive battles."

"What are you suggesting?"

"That French revisionists might be involved."

"But it didn't affect the outcome of either battle," I asserted. "We still won on both occasions!"

"I never said they were good at it."

"That's ludicrous!" I scoffed. "I suppose you think the same revisionists had King Harold killed in 1066 to assist the Norman invasion!"

But Dad wasn't laughing. He replied with some surprise:

"Harold? Killed? How?"

"An arrow, Dad. In his eye."

"English or French?"

"History doesn't relate," I replied, annoyed at his bizarre line of questioning.

"In his eye, you say?-- Time is out of joint," he muttered, scribbling another note.

"*What's out of joint?*" I asked, not quite hearing him.

"Nothing, nothing. Good job I was born to set it right--"

"*Hamlet?*" I asked, recognizing the quotation.

He ignored me, finished writing and snapped the notebook shut, then placed his fingertips on his temples and rubbed them absently for a moment. The world joggled forward a second and refroze as he did so. He looked about nervously.

"They're onto me. Thanks for your help, Sweetpea. When you see your mother, tell her she makes the torches burn brighter--and don't forget to try and dissuade her from painting the bedroom."

"Any color but mauve, right?"

"Right."

He smiled at me and touched my face. I felt my eyes moisten; these visits were all too short. He sensed my sadness and smiled the sort of smile any child would want to receive from their father. Then he spoke:

*"For I dipped into the past, far as SpecOps-12 could see--"*

He paused and I finished the quote, part of an old ChronoGuard song Dad used to sing to me when I was a child.

*"--saw a vision of the world and all the options there could be!"*

And then he was gone. The world rippled as the clock started again. The barman finished his sentence, the birds flew onto their nests, the television came back on with a nauseating ad for SmileyBurgers, and over the road the cyclist met the asphalt with a thud.

Everything carried on as normal. No one except myself had seen Dad come or go.

I ordered a crab sandwich and munched on it absently while sipping from a mocha that seemed to be taking an age to cool down. There weren't a lot of customers and Stanford, the owner, was busy washing up some cups. I put down my paper to watch the TV when the Toad

News Network logo came up.

Toad News was the biggest news network in Europe. Run by the Goliath Corporation, it was a twenty-four-hour service with up-to-date reports that the national news services couldn't possibly hope to match. Goliath gave it finance and stability, but also a slightly suspicious air. No one liked the Corporation's pernicious hold on the nation, and the Toad News Network received more than its fair share of criticism, despite repeated denials that the parent company called the shots.

"This," boomed the announcer above the swirling music, "is the Toad News Network. The Toad, bringing you News Global, News Updates, News NOW!"

The lights came up on the anchorwoman, who smiled into the camera.

"This is the midday news on Monday, May 6, 1985, and this is Alexandria Belfridge reading it. The Crimean Peninsula," she announced, "has again come under scrutiny this week as the United Nations passed resolution PN17296, insisting that England and the Imperial Russian Government open negotiations concerning sovereignty. As the Crimean War enters its one hundred and thirty-first year, pressure groups both at home and abroad are pushing for a peaceful end to hostilities."

I closed my eyes and groaned quietly to myself. I had been out there doing my patriotic duty in '73 and had seen the truth of warfare beyond the pomp and glory for myself. The heat, the cold, the fear, the death. The announcer spoke on, her voice edged with jingoism.

"When the English forces ejected the Russians from their last stronghold on the peninsula in 1975, it was seen as a major triumph against overwhelming odds. However, a state of deadlock has been maintained since those days and the country's mood was summed up last week by Sir Gordon Duff-Rolecks at an antiwar rally in Trafalgar Square."

The program cut to some footage of a large and mainly peaceful demonstration in central London. Duff-Rolecks was standing on a podium and giving a speech in front of a large and untidy nest of microphones.

"What began as an excuse to curb Russia's expansionism in 1854," intoned the MP, "has collapsed over the years into nothing more than an exercise to maintain the nation's pride . . ."

But I wasn't listening. I'd heard it all before a zillion times. I took another sip of coffee as sweat prickled my scalp. The TV showed stock footage of the peninsula as Duff-Rolecks spoke: Sebastopol, a heavily fortified English garrison town with little remaining of its architectural and historical heritage. Whenever I saw these pictures

the smell of cordite and the crack of exploding shells filled my head. I instinctively stroked the only outward mark from the campaign I had--a small raised scar on my chin. Others had not been so lucky. Nothing had changed. The war had ground on.

"It's all bullshit, Thursday," said a gravelly voice close at hand.

It was Stanford, the cafe owner. Like me he was a veteran of the Crimea, but from an earlier campaign. Unlike me he had lost more than just his innocence and some good friends; he lumbered around on two tin legs and still had enough shrapnel in his body to make half a dozen baked bean tins.

"The Crimea has got sod all to do with the United Nations."

He liked to talk about the Crimea with me despite our opposing views. No one else really wanted to. Soldiers involved in the ongoing dispute with Wales had more kudos; Crimean personnel on leave usually left their uniforms in the wardrobe.

"I suppose not," I replied noncommittally, staring out of the window to where I could see a Crimean veteran begging at a street corner, reciting Longfellow from memory for a couple of pennies.

"Makes all those lives seem wasted if we give it back now," added Stanford gruffly. "We've been there since 1854. It belongs to *us*. You might as well say we should give the Isle of Wight back to the French."

"We *did* give the Isle of Wight back to the French," I replied patiently; Stanford's grasp of current affairs was generally confined to first division croquet and the love life of actress Lola Vavoom.

"Oh yes," he muttered, brow knitted. "We did, didn't we? Well, we shouldn't have. And who do the UN think they are?"

"I don't know but if the killing stops they've got my vote, Stan."

The barkeeper shook his head sadly as Duff-Rolecks concluded his speech:

". . . there can be little doubt that the Czar Romanov Alexei IV *does* have overwhelming rights to sovereignty of the peninsula and I for one look forward to the day when we can withdraw our troops from what can only be described as an incalculable waste of human life and resources."

The Toad News anchorwoman came back on and moved to another item--the government was to raise the duty on cheese to 83 percent, an unpopular move that would doubtless have the more militant citizens picketing cheese shops.

"The Ruskies could stop it tomorrow if they pulled out!" said Stanford belligerently.

It wasn't an argument and he and I both knew it. There was nothing left of the peninsula that would be worth owning whoever won. The only stretch of land that hadn't been churned to a pulp by artillery bombardment was heavily mined. Historically and morally the Crimea

belonged to Imperial Russia; that was all there was to it.

The next news item was about a border skirmish with the People's Republic of Wales; no one hurt, just a few shots exchanged across the River Wye near Hay. Typically rambunctious, the youthful president-for-life Owain Glyndwr VII had blamed England's imperialist yearnings for a unified Britain; equally typically, Parliament had not so much as even made a statement about the incident. The news ground on, but I wasn't really paying attention. A new fusion plant had opened in Dungeness and the president had been there to open it. He grinned dutifully as the flashbulbs went off. I returned to my paper and read a story about a parliamentary bill to remove the dodo's protected species status after their staggering increase in numbers; but I couldn't concentrate. The Crimea had filled my mind with its unwelcome memories. It was lucky for me that my pager beeped and brought with it a much-needed reality check. I tossed a few notes on the counter and sprinted out of the door as the Toad News anchorwoman somberly announced that a young surrealist had been killed--stabbed to death by a gang adhering to a radical school of French impressionists.

## 2. Gad's Hill

... There are two schools of thought about the resilience of time. The first is that time is highly volatile, with every small event altering the possible outcome of the earth's future. The other view is that time is rigid, and no matter how hard you try, it will always spring back toward a determined present. Myself, I do not worry about such trivialities. I simply sell ties to anyone who wants to buy one...

Tie seller in Victoria, June 1983

**M**Y PAGER had delivered a disconcerting message; the unstealable had just been stolen. It was not the first time the *Martin Chuzzlewit* manuscript had been purloined. Two years before it had been removed from its case by a security man who wanted nothing more than to read the book in its pure and unsullied state. Unable to live with himself or decipher Dickens's handwriting past the third page, he eventually confessed and the manuscript was recovered. He spent five years sweating over lime kilns on the edge of Dartmoor.

Gad's Hill Palace was where Charles Dickens lived at the end of his life, but not where he wrote *Chuzzlewit*. That was at Devonshire Terrace, when he still lived with his first wife, in 1843. Gad's Hill is a large Victorian building near Rochester which had fine views of the Medway when Dickens bought it. If you screw up your eyes and ignore the oil refinery, heavy water plant and the ExcoMat containment facility, it's not too hard to see what drew him to this part of England. Several thousand visitors pass through Gad's Hill every day, making it the third-most popular area of literary pilgrimage after Anne Hathaway's cottage and the Brontës' Haworth House. Such huge numbers of people had created enormous security problems; no one was taking any chances since a deranged individual had broken into Chawton, threatening to destroy all Jane Austen's letters unless his frankly dull and uneven Austen biography was published. On that occasion no damage had been done, but it was a grim portent of things to come. In Dublin the following year an organized gang attempted to hold Jonathan Swift's papers to ransom. A protracted siege developed that ended with two of the extortionists shot dead and the destruction of several original political pamphlets and an early draft of *Gulliver's Travels*. The inevitable had to happen. Literary relics were placed under bullet-proof glass and guarded by electronic surveillance and armed officers. It was not the way anyone wanted it,

but it seemed the only answer. Since those days there had been few major problems, which made the theft of *Chuzzlewit* all the more remarkable.

I parked my car, clipped my SO-27 badge into my top pocket and pushed my way through the crowds of pressmen and gawkers. I saw Boswell from a distance and ducked under a police line to reach him.

"Good morning, sir," I muttered. "I came as soon as I heard."

He put a finger to his lips and whispered in my ear:

"Ground-floor window. Took less than ten minutes. Nothing else."

"What?"

Then I saw. Toad News Network's star reporter Lydia Startright was about to do an interview. The finely coiffured TV journalist finished her introduction and turned to us both. Boswell employed a neat sidestep, jabbed me playfully in the ribs and left me alone under the full glare of the news cameras.

"--of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, stolen from the Dickens Museum at Gad's Hill. I have with me Literary Detective Thursday Next. Tell me, Officer, how it was possible for thieves to break in and steal one of literature's greatest treasures?"

I murmured "bastard!" under my breath to Boswell, who slunk off shaking with mirth. I shifted my weight uneasily. With the enthusiasm for art and literature in the population undiminished, the LiteraTec's job was becoming increasingly difficult, made worse by a very limited budget.

"The thieves gained entrance through a window on the ground floor and went straight to the manuscript," I said in my best TV voice. "They were in and out within ten minutes."

"I understand the museum was monitored by closed-circuit television," continued Lydia. "Did you capture the thieves on video?"

"Our inquiries are proceeding," I replied. "You understand that some details must be kept secret for operational purposes."

Lydia lowered her microphone and cut the camera.

"Do you have *anything* to give me, Thursday?" she asked. "The parrot stuff I can get from anyone."

I smiled.

"I've only just got here, Lyds. Try me again in a week."

"Thursday, in a week this will be archive footage. Okay, roll VT."

The cameraman reshouldered his camera and Lydia resumed her report.

"Do you have any leads?"

"There are several avenues that we are pursuing. We are confident that we can return the manuscript to the museum and arrest the individuals concerned."

I wished I could share my own optimism. I had spent a lot of time at



Gad's Hill overseeing security arrangements, and I knew it was like the Bank of England. The people who did this were good. *Really* good. It also made it kind of personal. The interview ended and I ducked under a SpecOps DO NOT CROSS tape to where Boswell was waiting to meet me.

"This is one hell of a mess, Thursday. Turner, fill her in."

Boswell left us to it and went off to find something to eat.

"If you can see how they pulled this one off," murmured Paige who was a slightly older and female version of Boswell, "I'll eat my boots, buckles and all."

Both Turner and Boswell had been at the Litera Tec department when I turned up there, fresh from the military and a short career at the Swindon Police Department. Few people ever left the Litera Tec division; when you were in London you had pretty much reached the top of your profession. Promotion or death were the usual ways out; the saying was that a LiteraTec job wasn't for Christmas--it was for life.

"Boswell likes you, Thursday."

"In what sort of way?" I asked suspiciously.

"In the sort of way that he wants you in my shoes when I leave--I became engaged to a rather nice fellow from SO-3 at the weekend."

I should have been more enthusiastic, but Turner had been engaged so many times she could have filled every finger and toe--twice.

"SO-3?" I queried, somewhat inquisitively. Being in SpecOps was no guarantee you would know which departments did what--Joe Public were probably better informed. The only SpecOps divisions I knew about for sure below SO-12 were SO-9, who were Antiterrorist, and SO-1, who were Internal Affairs--the SpecOps police; the people who made sure we didn't step out of line.

"SO-3?" I repeated. "What do *they* do?"

"Weird Stuff."

"I thought SO-2 did Weird Stuff?"

"SO-2 do *Weirder* Stuff. I asked him but he never got around to answering--we were kind of busy. Look at this."

Turner had led me into the manuscript room. The glass case that had held the leather-bound manuscript was empty.

"Anything?" Paige asked one of the scene-of-crime officers.

"Nothing."

"Gloves?" I asked.

The SOCO stood up and stretched her back; she hadn't discovered a single print of any sort.

"No; and that's what's so bizarre. It doesn't look like they touched the box at all; not with gloves, not a cloth--nothing. According to me this box hasn't been opened and the manuscript is still inside!"

I looked at the glass case. It was still locked tight and none of the other exhibits had been touched. The keys were kept separately and were at this moment on their way from London.

"Hello, that's odd--" I muttered, leaning closer.

"What do you see?" asked Paige anxiously.

I pointed to an area of glass on one of the side panels that undulated slightly. The area was roughly the size of the manuscript.

"I noticed that," said Paige. "I thought it was a flaw in the glass."

"Toughened bullet-proof glass?" I asked her. "No chance. And it *wasn't* like this when I supervised the fitting, I can assure you of that."

"What, then?"

I stroked the hard glass and felt the shiny surface ripple beneath my fingertips. A shiver ran up my back and I felt a curious sense of uncomfortable familiarity, the feeling you might get when a long-forgotten school bully hails you as an old friend.

"The work feels familiar, Paige. When I find the perpetrator, it'll be someone I know."

"You've been a Litera Tec for seven years, Thursday."

I saw what she meant.

"Eight years, and you're right--you'll probably know them too. Could Lamber Thwalts have done this?"

"He *could* have, if he wasn't still in the hokey--four years still to go over that *Love's Labor's Won* scam."

"What about Keens? He could handle something as big as this."

"Milton's no longer with us. Caught analepsy in the library at Parkhurst. Stone-cold dead in a fortnight."

"Hmm."

I pointed at the two video cameras.

"Who did they see?"

"No one," replied Turner. "Not a dicky bird. I can play you the tapes but you'll be none the wiser."

She showed me what they had. The guard on duty was being interviewed back at the station. They were hoping it was an inside job but it didn't look like it; the guard had been as devastated as any of them.

Turner shuttled the video back and pressed the play button.

"Watch carefully. The recorder rotates the five cameras and films five seconds of each."

"So the longest gap between cameras is twenty seconds?"

"Got it. You watching? Okay, there's the manuscript--" She pointed at the book, clearly visible in the frame as the VCR flicked to the camera at the front door. There was no movement. Then the inside door through which any burglar would have to come; all the other entrances were barred. Then came the corridor; then the lobby; then

the machine flicked back to the manuscript room. Turner punched the pause button and I leaned closer. The manuscript was gone.

"Twenty seconds to get in, open the box, take *Chuzzlewit* and then leg it? It's not possible."

"Believe you me, Thursday--it happened."

The last remark came from Boswell, who had been looking over my shoulder.

"I don't know how they did it, but they did. I've had a call from Supreme Commander Gale on this one and he's being leaned on by the prime minister. Questions have already been asked in the House and someone's head is going to roll. Not mine, I assure you."

He looked at us both rather pointedly, which made me feel especially ill at ease--I was the one who had advised the museum on its security arrangements.

"We'll be onto it straight away, sir," I replied, punching the pause button and letting the video run on. The views of the building changed rhythmically, revealing nothing. I pulled up a chair, rewound the tape and looked again.

"What are you hoping to find?" asked Paige.

"Anything."

I didn't find it.

### 3.

## Back at My Desk

Funding for the Special Operations Network comes directly from the government. Most work is centralized, but all of the SpecOps divisions have local representatives to keep a watchful eye on any provincial problems. They are administered by local commanders, who liaise with the national offices for information exchange, guidance and policy decisions. Like any other big government department, it looks good on paper but is an utter shambles. Petty infighting and political agendas, arrogance and sheer bloody-mindedness almost *guarantees* that the left hand doesn't know what the right is doing.

MILLON DE FLOSS

--A Short History of the Special Operations Network

TWO DAYS of fruitless hunting for *Chuzzlewit* had passed without even the slightest clue as to where it might be. There had been whispers of reprimands, but only if we could figure out how the manuscript was taken. It would seem a bit ludicrous to be chastised for leaving a loophole in the security arrangements but not know what it was. Now slightly despondent, I was sitting at my desk back at the station. Recalling my conversation with Dad, I phoned my mother to ask her not to paint the bedroom mauve. The call backfired slightly as she thought this a *grand* idea and hung up before I could argue. I sighed and flipped through the telephone messages that had accumulated over the past two days. They were mostly from informers and concerned citizens who had been robbed or cheated and wanted to know if we had made any headway. It was all small beer compared to *Chuzzlewit*--there were a lot of gullible people out there buying first editions of Byronic verse at knockdown prices, then complaining bitterly when they found out they were fakes. Like most of the other operatives, I had a pretty good idea who was behind all of this, but we never caught the big fish--just the "utterers," the dealers who sold it all on. It smacked of corruption in high places but we never had any proof. Usually I read my messages with interest, but today none of it seemed terribly important. After all, the verses of Byron, Keats or Poe are real whether they are in bootleg form or not. You can still read them for the same effect.

I opened the drawer of my desk and pulled out a small mirror. A woman with somewhat ordinary features stared back at me. Her hair was a plain mousy color and of medium length, tied up rather hastily in a ponytail at the back. She had no cheekbones to speak of and her face, I noticed, had just started to show some rather obvious lines. I

thought of my mother, who had looked as wrinkled as a walnut by the time she was forty-five. I shuddered, placed the mirror back in the drawer and took out a faded and slightly dog-eared photograph. It was a photo of myself with a group of friends taken in the Crimea when I had been simply Corporal T. E. Next, 33550336, Driver: APC, Light Armored Brigade. I had served my country diligently, been involved in a military disaster and then honorably discharged with a gong to prove it. They had expected me to give talks about recruitment and valor but I had disappointed them. I attended one regimental reunion but that was it; I had found myself looking for the faces that I knew weren't there.

In the photo Landen was standing on my left, his arm around me and another soldier, my brother, his best mate. Landen lost a leg, but he came home. My brother was still out there.

"Who's that?" asked Paige, who had been looking over my shoulder.

"Whoa!" I yelped. "You just scared the crap out of me!"

"Sorry! Crimea?"

I handed her the photo and she looked at it intently.

"That must be your brother--you have the same nose."

"I know, we used to share it on a rota. I had it Mondays, Wednesd--"

--then the other man must be Landen."

I frowned and turned to face her. I *never* mentioned Landen to anyone. It was *personal*. I felt kind of betrayed that she might have been prying behind my back.

"How do you know about Landen?"

She sensed the anger in my voice, smiled and raised an eyebrow.

"*You* told me about him."

"I did?"

"Sure. The speech was slurred and for the most part it was garbage, but he was certainly on your mind."

I winced.

"Last year's Christmas bash?"

"Or the year before. You weren't the only one talking garbage with slurred speech."

I looked at the photo again.

"We were engaged."

Paige suddenly looked uneasy. Crimean fiances could be *seriously* bad conversation topics.

"Did he . . . ah . . . come back?"

"Most of him. He left a leg behind. We don't speak too much these days."

"What's his full name?" asked Paige, interested in finally getting something out of my past.

"It's Parke-Laine. Landen Parke-Laine." It was the first time I had

said his name out loud for almost longer than I could remember.

"Parke-Laine the writer?"

I nodded.

"Good-looking bloke."

"Thank you," I replied, not quite knowing what I was thanking her for. I put the photograph back in my drawer and Paige clicked her fingers.

"Boswell wants to see you," she announced, finally remembering what she had come over to say.

Boswell was not alone. A man in his forties was waiting for me and rose as I entered. He didn't blink very much and had a large scar down one side of his face. Boswell hummed and hawed for a moment, coughed, looked at his watch and then said something about leaving us to it.

"Police?" I asked as soon as we were alone. "Has a relative died or something?"

The man closed the Venetian blinds to give us more privacy.

"Not that I heard about."

"SO-1?" I asked, expecting a possible reprimand.

"Me?" replied the man with genuine surprise. "No."

"Litera Tec?"

"Why don't you sit down?"

He offered me a seat and then sat down in Boswell's large oak swivel chair. He had a buff file with my name on the cover which he flopped on the desk in front of him. I was amazed by how thick the file was.

"Is that all about me?"

He ignored me. Instead of opening my file, he leaned forward and gazed at me with his unblinking eyes.

"How do you rate the *Chuzzlewit* case?"

I found myself staring at his scar. It ran from his forehead down to his chin and had all the size and subtlety of a shipbuilder's weld. It pulled his lip up, but apart from that his face was pleasant enough; without the scar he might have been handsome. I was being unsubtle. He instinctively brought up a hand to cover it.

"Finest Cossack," he murmured, making light of it.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's hard not to gawp."

He paused for a moment.

"I work for SpecOps-5," he announced slowly, showing me a shiny badge.

"SO-5?" I gasped, failing to hide the surprise in my voice. "What do you lot do?"

"That's restricted, Miss Next. I showed you the badge so you could talk to me without worrying about security clearances. I can okay that with Boswell if you'd prefer?--"

My heart was beating faster. Interviews with SpecOps operatives farther up the ladder sometimes led to transfers--

"So, Miss Next, what do you think about *Chuzzlewit*?"

"You want my opinion or the official version?"

"Your opinion. Official versions I get from Boswell."

"I think it's too early to tell. If ransom is the motive then we can assume the manuscript is still in one piece. If it's stolen to sell or barter we can also consider it in one piece. If terrorism is the game then we might have to be worried. In scenarios one and three the Litera Tecs have sod all to do with it. SO-9 get involved and we're kind of out of the picture."

The man looked at me intently and nodded his head.

"You don't like it here, do you?"

"I've had enough, put it that way," I responded, slightly less guardedly than I should. "Who are you, anyway?"

The man laughed.

"Sorry. Very bad manners; I didn't mean all the cloak-and-dagger stuff. The name's Tamworth, head field operative at SO-5. Actually," he added, "that doesn't mean so much. At present there are just me and two others."

I shook his outstretched hand.

"Three people in a SpecOps division?" I asked curiously. "Isn't that kind of mean?"

"I lost some guys yesterday."

"I'm sorry."

"Not that way. We just made a bit of headway and that's not always good news. Some people research well in SO-5 but don't like the fieldwork. They have kids. I don't. But I understand."

I nodded. I understood too.

"Why are you talking to me?" I asked almost casually. "I'm SO-27; as the SpecOps transfer board so kindly keeps telling me, my talents lie either in front of a Litera Tec desk or a kitchen stove."

Tamworth smiled. He patted the file in front of him.

"I know all about that. SpecOps Central Recruiting don't really have a good word for 'No,' they just fob. It's what they're best at. On the contrary, they are fully aware of your potential. I spoke to Boswell just now and he thinks he can just about let you go if you want to help us over at SO-5."

"If you're SO-5 he doesn't have much choice, does he?"

Tamworth laughed.

"That's true. But *you* do. I'd never recruit anyone who didn't want to

join me."

I looked at him. He meant it.

"Is this a transfer?"

"No," replied Tamworth, "it isn't. I just need you because you have information that is of use to us. You'll be an observer; nothing more. Once you understand what we're up against you'll be very glad to be just that."

"So when this is over I just get thrown back here?"

He paused and looked at me for a moment, trying to give the best assurance that he could without lying. I liked him for it.

"I make no guarantees, Miss Next, but anyone who has been on an SO-5 assignment can be pretty confident that they won't be SO-27 forever."

"What is it you want me to do?"

Tamworth pulled a form from his case and pushed it across the table to me. It was a standard security clearance and, once signed, gave SpecOps the right to almost everything I possessed and a lot more besides if I so much as breathed a word to someone with a lesser clearance. I signed it dutifully and handed it back. In exchange he gave me a shiny SO-5 badge with my name already in place. Tamworth knew me better than I thought. This done, he lowered his voice and began:

"SO-5 is basically a Search & Containment facility. We are posted with a man to track until found and contained, then we get another. SO-4 is pretty much the same; they are just after a different thing. Person. You know. Anyway, I was down at Gad's Hill this morning, Thursday--can I call you Thursday?--and I had a good look at the crime scene at first hand. Whoever took the manuscript of *Chuzzlewit* left no fingerprints, no sign of entry and nothing on any of the cameras."

"Not a lot to go on, was there?"

"On the contrary. It was just the break I've been waiting for."

"Did you share this with Boswell?" I asked.

"Of course not. We're not interested in the manuscript; we're interested in the man who stole it."

"And who's that?"

"I can't tell you his name but I can write it."

He took out a felt tip and wrote "Acheron Hades" on a notepad and held it up for me to read.

"Look familiar?"

"Very familiar. There can't be many people who haven't heard about him."

"I know. But you've met him, haven't you?"

"Certainly," I replied. "He was one of the lecturers when I studied



English at Swindon in '68. None of us were surprised when he switched to a career of crime. He was something of a lech. He made one of the students pregnant."

"Braeburn; yes, we know about her. What about you?"

"He never made me pregnant, but he had a good try."

"Did you sleep with him?"

"No; I didn't figure sleeping with lecturers was really where I wanted to be. The attention was flattering, I suppose, dinner and stuff. He was brilliant--but a moral vacuum. I remember once he was arrested for armed robbery while giving a spirited lecture on John Webster's *The White Devil*. He was released without charge on that occasion, but the Braeburn thing was enough to have him dismissed."

"He asked you to go with him yet you turned him down."

"Your information is good, Mr. Tamworth."

Tamworth scribbled a note on his pad. He looked up at me again.

"But the important thing is: You know what he looks like?"

"Of course," I replied, "but you're wasting your time. He died in Venezuela in '82."

"No; he just made us *think* he had. We exhumed the grave the following year. It wasn't him at all. He feigned death so well that he fooled the doctors; they buried a weighted coffin. He has powers that are slightly baffling. That's why we can't say his name. I call it Rule Number One."

"His name? Why not?"

"Because he can hear his own name--even whispered--over a thousand-yard radius, perhaps more. He uses it to sense our presence."

"And why do you suppose he stole *Chuzzlewit*?"

Tamworth reached into his case and pulled out a file. It was marked "Most Secret--SpecOps-5 clearance only." The slot in the front, usually reserved for a mugshot, was empty.

"We don't have a picture of him," said Tamworth as I opened the file. "He doesn't resolve on film or video and has never been in custody long enough to be sketched. Remember the cameras at Gad's Hill?"

"Yes?"

"They didn't pick anyone up. I went through the tapes very carefully. The camera angle changed every five seconds yet there would be *no way* anyone could dodge all of them during the time they were in the building. Do you see what I mean?"

I nodded slowly and flicked through the pages of Acheron's file. Tamworth continued:

"I've been after him for five years. He has seven outstanding warrants for murder in England, eighteen in America. Extortion, theft and kidnapping. He's cold, calculating and quite ruthless. Thirty-six of

his forty-two known victims were either SpecOps or police officers."

"Hartlepool in '75?" I asked.

"Yes," replied Tamworth slowly. "You heard about it?"

I had. Most people had. Hades had been cornered in the basement of a multistory car park after a botched robbery. One of his associates lay dead in a bank nearby; Acheron had killed the wounded man to stop him talking. In the basement, he persuaded an officer into giving him his gun, killing six others as he walked out. The only officer who survived was the one whose gun he had used. That was Acheron's idea of a joke. The officer in question never gave a satisfactory explanation as to *why* he had given up his firearm. He had taken early retirement and gassed himself in his car six years later after a short history of alcoholism and petty theft. He came to be known as the seventh victim.

"I interviewed the Hartlepool survivor before he took his own life," Tamworth went on, "after I was instructed to find . . . *him* at any cost. My findings led us to formulate Rule Number Two: If you ever have the misfortune to face him in person, *believe nothing that he says or does*. He can lie in thought, deed, action and appearance. He has amazing persuasive powers over those of weak mind. Did I tell you that we have been authorized to use maximum force?"

"No, but I guessed."

"SO-5 has a shoot-to-kill policy concerning our friend--"

"Whoa, whoa, wait a sec. You have the power to eliminate *without* trial?"

"Welcome to SpecOps-5, Thursday--what did you think *containment* meant?"

He laughed a laugh that was slightly disturbing.

"As the saying goes: *If you want to get into SpecOps, act kinda weird*. We don't tend to pussyfoot around."

"Is it legal?"

"Not in the least. It's Blind Eye Grand Central below SpecOps-8. We have a saying: *Below the eight, above the law*. Ever hear it?"

"No."

"You'll hear it a lot. In any event we make it our Rule Number Three: Apprehension is of minimal importance. What gun do you carry?"

I told him and he scribbled a note.

"I'll get some fluted expansion slugs for you."

"There'll be hell to pay if we get caught with those."

"Self-defense only," explained Tamworth quickly. "*You* won't be dealing with this man; I just want you to ID him if he shows. But listen: If the shit hits the fan I don't want any of my people left with bows and arrows against the lightning. And anything less than an

expanding slug is about as much good as using wet cardboard as a flak jacket. We know almost nothing about him. No birth certificate, not even a reliable age or even who his parents were. He just appeared on the scene in '54 as a petty criminal with a literary edge and has worked his way steadily upward to being number three on the planet's most-wanted list."

"Who're number one and two?"

"I don't know and I have been reliably informed that it's far better *not* to know."

"So where do we go from here?"

"I'll call you. Stay alert and keep your pager with you at all times. You're on leave as of now from SO-27, so just enjoy the time off. I'll be seeing you!"

He was gone in an instant, leaving me with the SO-5 badge and a thumping heart. Boswell returned, followed by a curious Paige. I showed them both the badge.

"Way to go!" said Paige, giving me a hug, but Boswell seemed less happy. After all, he did have his own department to think about.

"They can play very rough at SO-5, Next," said Boswell in a fatherly tone. "I want you to go back to your desk and have a long calm think about this. Have a cup of coffee and a bun. No, have *two* buns. Don't make any rash decisions, and just run through all the pros and cons of the argument. When you've done that I would be happy to adjudicate. Do you understand?"

I understood. In my hurry to leave the office I almost forgot the picture of Landen.

## 4.

### Acheron Hades

. . . The best reason for committing loathsome and detestable acts--and let's face it, I am considered something of an expert in this field--is purely for their own sake. Monetary gain is all very well, but it dilutes the taste of wickedness to a lower level that is obtainable by anyone with an overdeveloped sense of avarice. True and baseless evil is as rare as the purest good--and we all know how rare *that* is . . .

ACHERON HADES

--*Degeneracy for Pleasure and Profit*

TAMWORTH DIDN'T call that week, nor the week after. I tried to call him at the beginning of the third week but was put through to a trained denialist who flatly refused to admit that Tamworth or SO-5 even *existed*. I used the time to get up-to-date with some reading, filing, mending the car and also--because of the new legislation--to register Pickwick as a pet rather than a wild dodo. I took him to the town hall where a veterinary inspector studied the once-extinct bird very carefully. Pickwick stared back forlornly, as he, in common with most pets, didn't fancy the vet much.

"Plock-plock," said Pickwick nervously as the inspector expertly clipped the large brass ring around his ankle.

"No wings?" asked the official curiously, staring at Pickwick's slightly odd shape.

"He's a Version 1.2," I explained. "One of the first. They didn't get the sequence complete until 1.7."

"Must be pretty old."

"Twelve years this October."

"I had one of the early Thylacines," said the official glumly. "A Version 2.1. When we decanted him he had no ears. Stone deaf. No warranty or anything. Bloody liberty, I call it. Do you read *New Splicer*?"

I had to admit that I didn't.

"They sequenced a Steller's sea cow last week. How do I even get one of those through the door?"

"Grease its sides?" I suggested. "And show it a plate of kelp?"

But the official wasn't listening; he had turned his attention to the next dodo, a pinkish creature with a long neck. The owner caught my eye and smiled sheepishly.

"Redundant strands filled in with flamingo," he explained. "I should

have used dove."

"Version 2.9?"

"2.9.1, actually. A bit of a hotchpotch but to us he's simply Chester. We wouldn't swap him for anything."

The inspector had been studying Chester's registration documents.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "2.9.1s come under the new Chimera category."

"What do you mean?"

"Not enough dodo to be dodo. Room seven down the corridor. Follow the owner of the pukey, but be careful; I sent a quarkbeast down there this morning."

I left Chester's owner and the official arguing together and took Pickwick for a waddle in the park. I let him off the leash and he chased a few pigeons before fraternizing with some feral dodos who were cooling their feet in the pond. They splashed excitedly and made quiet *plock plock* noises to one another until it was time to go home.

Two days after that I had run out of ways to rearrange the furniture, so it was lucky that Tamworth called me. He told me he was on a stakeout and that I needed to join him. I hastily scribbled down the address and was in the East End in under forty minutes. The stakeout was in a shabby street of converted warehouses that had been due for demolition two decades before. I doused the lights and got out, hid anything of value and locked the car carefully. The battered Pontiac was old and grotty enough not to arouse suspicion in the grimy surroundings. I glanced around. The brickwork was crumbling and heavy smears of green algae streaked the walls where the down pipes had once been. The windows were cracked and dirty and the brick wall at ground level was stained alternately with graffiti or the sooty blackness of a recent fire. A rusty fire escape zigzagged up the dark building and cast a staccato shadow on the potholed road and several burned-out cars. I made my way to a side door according to Tamworth's instructions. Inside, large cracks had opened up in the walls and the damp and decay had mixed with the smell of Jeyes fluid and a curry shop on the ground floor. A neon light flashed on and off regularly, and I saw several women in tight skirts hovering in the dark doorways. The citizens who lived in the area were a curious mix; the lack of cheap housing in and around London attracted a cross section of people, from locals to down-and-outs to professionals. It wasn't great from a law-and-order point of view, but it did allow SpecOps agents to move around without raising suspicion.

I reached the seventh floor, where a couple of young Henry Fielding fanatics were busy swapping bubble-gum cards.

"I'll swap you one Sophia for an Amelia."

"Piss off!" replied his friend indignantly. "If you want Sophia you're going to have to give me an Allworthy plus a Tom Jones, *as well* as the Amelia!"

His friend, realizing the rarity of a Sophia, reluctantly agreed. The deal was done and they ran off downstairs to look for hubcaps. I compared a number with the address that Tamworth had given me and rapped on a door covered with peeling peach-colored paint. It was opened cautiously by a man somewhere in his eighties. He half-hid his face from me with a wrinkled hand, and I showed him my badge.

"You must be Next," he said in a voice that was really quite sprightly for his age. I ignored the old joke and went in. Tamworth was peering through some binoculars at a room in the building opposite and waved a greeting without looking up. I looked at the old man again and smiled.

"Call me Thursday."

He seemed gratified at this and shook my hand.

"The name's Snood; you can call me Junior."

"Snood?" I echoed. "Any relation to Filbert?"

The old man nodded.

"Filbert, ah yes!" he murmured. "A good lad and a fine son to his father!"

Filbert Snood was the only man who had even remotely interested me since I left Landen ten years ago. Snood had been in the ChronoGuard; he went away on assignment to Tewkesbury and never came back. I had a call from his commanding officer explaining that he had been unavoidably detained. I took that to mean another girl. It hurt at the time but I hadn't been in love with Filbert. I was certain of that because I *had* been in love with Landen. When you've been there you know it, like seeing a Turner or going for a walk on the west coast of Ireland.

"So you're his father?"

Snood walked through to the kitchen but I wasn't going to let it go.

"So how is he? Where's he living these days?"

The old man fumbled with the kettle.

"I find it hard to talk about Filbert," he announced at length, dabbing the corner of his mouth with a handkerchief. "It was so long ago!"

"He's dead?" I asked.

"Oh no," murmured the old man. "He's not dead; I think you were told he was unavoidably detained, yes?"

"Yes. I thought he had found someone else or something."

"We thought you would understand; your father was or is, I suppose, in the ChronoGuard and we use certain-let me see-*euphemisms*."

He looked at me intently with clear blue eyes staring through heavy lids. My heart thumped heavily.

"What are you saying?" I asked him.

The old man thought about saying something else but then lapsed into silence, paused for a moment and then shuffled back to the main room to mark up videotape labels. There was obviously more to it than just a girl in Tewkesbury, but time was on my side. I let the matter drop.

It gave me a chance to look around the room. A trestle table against one damp wall was stacked with surveillance equipment. A Revox spool-to-spool tape recorder slowly revolved next to a mixing box that placed all seven bugs in the room opposite and the phone line onto eight different tracks of the tape. Set back from the windows were two binoculars, a camera with a powerful telephoto lens, and next to this a video camera recording at slow speed onto a ten-hour tape.

Tamworth looked up from the binoculars.

"Welcome, Thursday. Come and have a look!"

I looked through the binoculars. In the flat opposite, not thirty yards distant, I could see a well-dressed man aged perhaps fifty with a pinched face and a concerned expression. He seemed to be on the phone.

"That's not him."

Tamworth smiled.

"I know. This is his brother, Styx. We found out about him this morning. SO-14 were going to pick him up but *our* man is a much bigger fish; I called SO-1, who intervened on our behalf; Styx is our responsibility at the moment. Have a listen."

He handed me some earphones and I looked through the binoculars again. Hades' brother was sitting at a large walnut desk flicking through a copy of the *London and District Car Trader*. As I watched, he stopped, picked up the phone and dialed a number.

"Hello?" said Styx into the phone.

"Hello?" replied a middle-aged woman, the recipient of the call.

"Do you have a 1976 Chevrolet for sale?"

"Buying a car?" I asked Tamworth.

"Keep listening. Same time every week, apparently. Regular as clockwork."

"It's only got eighty-two thousand miles on the clock," continued the lady, "and runs really well. MOT and tax paid 'til year's end too."

"It sounds *perfect*," replied Styx. "I'll be willing to pay cash. Will you hold it for me? I'll be about an hour. You're in Clapham, yes?"

The woman agreed, and she read over an address that Styx didn't bother writing down. He reaffirmed his interest and then hung up, only to call a different number about another car in Hounslow. I took

off the headphones and pulled out the headset jack so we could hear Styx's nasal rasp over the loudspeakers.

"How long does he do this for?"

"From SO-14 records, until he gets bored. Six hours, sometimes eight. He's not the only one either. Anyone who has ever sold a car gets someone like Styx on the phone at least once. Here, these are for you."

He handed me a box of ammunition with expanding slugs developed for maximum internal damage.

"What is he? A buffalo?"

But Tamworth wasn't amused.

"We're up against something *quite* different here, Thursday. Pray to the GSD you never have to use them, but if you do, don't hesitate. Our man doesn't give second chances."

I took the clip out of my automatic and reloaded it and the spare I carried with me, leaving a standard slug on top in case of an SO-1 spot check. Over in the flat, Styx had dialed another number in Ruislip.

"Hello?" replied the unfortunate car owner on the other end of the line.

"Yes, I saw your advert for a Ford Granada in today's *Trader*," continued Styx. "Is it still for sale?"

Styx got the address out of the car owner, promised to be around in ten minutes, put the phone down and then rubbed his hands with glee, laughing childishly. He put a line through the advert and then went onto the next.

"Doesn't even have a license," said Tamworth from the other side of the room. "He spends the rest of his time stealing ballpoints, causing electrical goods to fail *after* the guarantee has expired and scratching records in record shops."

"A bit childish, isn't it?"

"I'd say," replied Tamworth. "He's possessed of a certain amount of wickedness, but nothing like his brother."

"So what's the connection between Styx and the *Chuzzlewit* manuscript?"

"We suspect that he may have it. According to SO-14's surveillance records he brought in a package the evening of the break-in at Gad's Hill. I'm the first to admit that this is a long shot but it's the best evidence of *his* whereabouts these past three years. It's about time he broke cover."

"Has he demanded a ransom for the manuscript?" I asked.

"No, but it's early days. It might not be as simple as we think. Our man has an estimated IQ of one eighty, so simple extortion might be too easy for him."

Snood came in and sat down slightly shakily at the binoculars, put



on the headphones and plugged in the jack. Tamworth picked up his keys and handed me a book.

"I have to meet up with my opposite number at SO-4. I'll be about an hour. If anything happens, just page me. My number is on redial one. Have a read of this if you get bored."

I looked at the small book he had given me. It was Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* bound in thick red leather.

"Who told you?" I asked sharply.

"Who told me what?" replied Tamworth, genuinely surprised.

"It's just . . . I've read this book a lot. When I was younger. I know it very well."

"And you like the ending?"

I thought for a moment. The rather flawed climax of the book was a cause of considerable bitterness within Bronte circles. It was generally agreed that if Jane had returned to Thornfield Hall and married Rochester, the book might have been a lot better than it was.

"No one likes the ending, Tamworth. But there's more than enough in it regardless of that."

"Then a reread will be especially instructive, won't it?"

There was a knock at the door. Tamworth answered it and a man who was all shoulders and no neck entered.

"Just in time!" said Tamworth, looking at his watch. "Thursday Next, this is Buckett. He's temporary until I get a replacement."

He smiled and was gone.

Buckett and I shook hands. He smiled wanly as though this sort of job was not something he relished. He told me that he was pleased to meet me, then went to speak to Snood about the results of a horse race.

I tapped my fingertips on the copy of *Jane Eyre* that Tamworth had given me and placed it in my breast pocket. I rounded up the coffee cups and took them next door to the cracked enamel sink. Buckett appeared at the doorway.

"Tamworth said you were a Litera Tec."

"Tamworth was correct."

"I wanted to be a Litera Tec."

"You did?" I replied, seeing if there was anything in the fridge that wasn't a year past its sell-by date.

"Yeah. But they said you had to read a book or two."

"It helps."

There was a knock at the door and Buckett instinctively reached for his handgun. He was more on edge than I had thought.

"Easy, Buckett. I'll get it."

He joined me at the door and released the safety from his pistol. I looked at him and he nodded back in reply.

"Who's there?" I said without opening the door.

"Hello!" replied a voice. "My name's Edmund Capillary. Have you ever stopped to wonder whether it was *really* William Shakespeare who penned all those wonderful plays?"

We both breathed a sigh of relief and Buckett put the safety back on his automatic, muttering under his breath:

"Bloody Baconians!"

"Steady," I replied, "it's not illegal."

"More's the pity."

"Shh."

I opened the door on the security chain and found a small man in a lumpy corduroy suit. He was holding a dog-eared ID for me to see and politely raised his hat with a nervous smile. The Baconians were quite mad but for the most part harmless. Their purpose in life was to prove that Francis Bacon and not Will Shakespeare had penned the greatest plays in the English language. Bacon, they believed, had not been given the recognition that he rightfully deserved and they campaigned tirelessly to redress this supposed injustice.

"Hello!" said the Baconian brightly. "Can I take a moment of your time?"

I answered slowly:

"If you expect me to believe that a lawyer wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I must be dafter than I look."

The Baconian was not to be put off. He obviously liked fighting a poor argument; in real life he was most likely a personal accident barrister.

"Not as daft as supposing that a Warwickshire schoolboy with almost no education could write works that were not for an age but for all time."

"There is no evidence that he was without formal education," I returned evenly, suddenly enjoying myself. Buckett wanted me to get rid of him but I ignored his gesticulations.

"Agreed," continued the Baconian, "but I would argue that the Shakespeare in Stratford was *not* the same man as the Shakespeare in London."

It was an interesting approach. I paused and Edmund Capillary took the opportunity to pounce. He launched into his well-rehearsed patter almost automatically:

"The Shakespeare in Stratford was a wealthy grain trader and buying houses when the Shakespeare in London was being pursued by tax collectors for petty sums. The collectors traced him to Sussex on one occasion in 1600; yet why not take action against him in Stratford?"

"Search me."

He was on a roll now.

"No one is recorded in Stratford as having any idea of his literary success. He was never known to have bought a book, written a letter or indeed done anything apart from being a purveyor of bagged commodities, grain and malt and so forth."

The small man looked triumphant.

"So where does Bacon fit into all this?" I asked him.

"Francis Bacon was an Elizabethan writer who had been forced into becoming a lawyer and politician by his family. Since being associated with something like the theater would have been frowned upon, Bacon had to enlist the help of a poor actor named Shakespeare to act as his front man--history has mistakenly linked the two Shakespeares to give added validity to a story that otherwise has little substance."

"And the proof?"

"Hall and Marston--both Elizabethan satirists--were firmly of the belief that Bacon was the true author of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. I have a pamphlet here which goes into the matter further. More details are available at our monthly gatherings; we used to meet at the town hall but the radical wing of the New Marlovians fire-bombed us last week. I don't know where we will meet next. But if I can take your name and number, we can be in touch."

His face was earnest and smug; he thought he had me. I decided to play my trump card.

"What about the will?"

"The will?" he echoed, slightly nervously. He was obviously hoping I wasn't going to mention it.

"Yes," I continued. "If Shakespeare were *truly* two people, then why would the Shakespeare in Stratford mention the London Shakespeare's theater colleagues Condell, Heming and Burbage in his will?"

The Baconian's face fell.

"I was hoping you wouldn't ask." He sighed. "I'm wasting my time, aren't I?"

"I'm afraid you are."

He muttered something under his breath and moved on. As I threw the bolt I could hear the Baconian knocking at the next door to ours. Perhaps he'd have better luck down the corridor.

"What is a Litera Tec doing here anyway, Next?" asked Buckett as we returned to the kitchen.

"I'm here," I answered slowly, "because I know what *he* looks like; I'm not permanent in the least. As soon as I've fingered his man, Tamworth will transfer me back again."

I poured some yogurty milk down the sink and rinsed out the container.

"Might be a blessing."

"I don't see it that way. What about you? How did you get in with Tamworth?"

"I'm antiterrorist usually. SO-9. But Tamworth has trouble with recruitment. He took a cavalry saber for me. I owe him."

He dropped his eyes and fiddled with his tie for a moment. I peered cautiously into a cupboard for a dishcloth, discovered something nasty and then closed it quickly.

Buckett took out his wallet and showed me a picture of a dribbling infant that looked like every other dribbling infant I had ever seen.

"I'm married now so Tamworth knows I can't stay; one's needs change, you know."

"Good-looking kid."

"Thank you." He put the picture away. "You married?"

"Not for want of trying," I replied as I filled the kettle. Buckett nodded and brought out a copy of *Fast Horse*.

"Do you ever flutter on the gee-gees? I've had an unusual tip on Malabar."

"I don't. Sorry."

Buckett nodded. His conversation had pretty much dried up.

I brought in some coffee a few minutes later. Snood and Buckett were discussing the outcome of the Cheltenham Gold Stakes Handicap.

"So you know what he looks like, Miss Next?" asked the ancient Snood without looking up from the binoculars.

"He was a lecturer of mine when I was at college. He's tricky to describe, though."

"Average build?"

"When I last saw him."

"Tall?"

"At least six-six."

"Black hair worn swept back and graying at the temples?"

Buckett and I looked at one another.

"Yes?--"

"I think he's over there, Thursday."

I jerked the headphone jack out.

"--Acheron!!" came Styx's voice over the loudspeaker. "Dear brother, *what* a pleasant surprise!"

I looked through the binoculars and could see Acheron in the flat with Styx. He was dressed in a large gray duster jacket and was exactly how I remembered him from all those years ago. It didn't seem as though he had aged even one day. I shivered involuntarily.

"Shit," I muttered. Snood had already dialed the pager number to alert Tamworth.

"Mosquitoes have stung the blue goat," he muttered down the

phone. "Thank you. Can you repeat that back and send it twice?"

My heart beat faster. Acheron might not stay long and I was in a position for advancement beyond the LiteraTecs for good. Capturing Hades would be something no one could ever ignore.

"I'm going over there," I said almost casually.

"What?!"

"You heard. Stay here and call SO-14 for armed backup, silent approach. Tell them we have gone in and to surround the building. Suspect will be armed and highly dangerous. Got it?"

Snood smiled in the manner that I had so liked in his son and reached for the telephone. I turned to Buckett.

"You with me?"

Buckett had turned a little pale.

"I'm . . . ah . . . with you," he replied slightly shakily.

I flew out of the door, down the stairs and into the lobby.

"Next!--"

It was Buckett. He had stopped and was visibly shaking.

"What is it?"

"I . . . I . . . can't do this," he announced, loosening his tie and rubbing the back of his neck. "I have the kid!--You don't know what *he* can do. I'm a betting man, Next. I *love* long odds. But we try and take him and we're both dead. I beg you, wait for SO-14!"

"He could be long gone by then. All we have to do is *detain* him."

Buckett bit his lip, but the man was terrified. He shook his head and beat a hasty retreat without another word. It was unnerving to say the least. I thought of shouting after him but remembered the picture of the dribbling kid. I pulled out my automatic, pushed open the door to the street and walked slowly across the road to the building opposite. As I did so Tamworth drew up in his car. He didn't look very happy.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Pursuing the suspect."

"No you're not. Where's Buckett?"

"On his way home."

"I don't blame him. SO-14 on their way?"

I nodded. He paused, looked up at the dark building and then at me.

"*Shit*. Okay, stay behind and stay sharp. Shoot first, then question. Below the eight--"

"--above the law. I remember."

"Good."

Tamworth pulled out his gun and we stepped cautiously into the lobby of the converted warehouse. Styx's flat was on the seventh floor. Surprise, hopefully, would be on our side.

## 5.

### Search for the Guilty, Punish the Innocent

. . . Perhaps it was as well that she had been unconscious for four weeks. She had missed the aftermath, the SO-1 reports, the recriminations, Snood and Tamworth's funerals. She missed everything . . . except the blame. It was waiting for her when she awoke . . .

MILLON DE FLOSS

-- Thursday Next--A Biography

I TRIED to focus on the striplight above me. I knew that *something* had happened but the night when Tamworth and I tackled Acheron Hades had, for the moment at least, been erased from my mind. I frowned, but only fractured images paraded themselves in my consciousness. I remembered shooting a little old lady three times and running down a fire escape. I had a dim recollection of blasting away at my own car and being shot in the arm. I looked at my arm and it was, indeed, tightly bound with a white bandage. Then I remembered being shot again--in the chest. I breathed in and out a couple of times and was relieved that no crackly rasp reached my ears. There was a nurse in the room who said a few words I couldn't decipher and smiled. I thought it odd and then lapsed once again into grateful slumber.

The next time I awoke it was evening and the room seemed colder. I was alone in a single hospital ward with seven empty beds. Just outside the door I could see an armed police officer on guard duty, while inside a vast quantity of flowers and cards vied for space. As I lay in bed the memories of the evening returned and tumbled out of my subconscious. I resisted them as long as I could but it was like holding back a flood. Everything that had happened that night came back in an instant. And as I remembered, I wept.

Within a week I was strong enough to get out of bed. Paige and Boswell had both dropped by, and even my mother had made the trip up from Swindon to see me. She told me she had painted the bedroom mauve, much to Dad's disappointment-- and it was my fault for suggesting it. I didn't think I'd bother trying to explain. I was glad of any sympathy, of course, but my mind was elsewhere: there had been a monumental fiasco and someone was going to be responsible; and as the sole survivor of that disastrous evening, I was the strongest and only candidate. A small office was procured in the hospital and into it came Tamworth's old divisional commander, a man whom I had never

met named Flanker, who seemed utterly devoid of humor and warmth. He brought with him a twin-cassette tape deck and several SO-1 senior operatives, who declined to give their names. I gave my testimony slowly and frankly, without emotion and as accurately as possible. Acheron's strange powers had been hinted at before, but even so Flanker was having trouble believing it.

"I've read Tamworth's file on Hades and it makes pretty weird reading, Miss Next," he said. "Tamworth was a bit of a loose cannon. SO-5 was his and his alone; Hades was more of an obsession than a job. From our initial inquiries it seems that he has been flaunting basic SpecOps guidelines. Contrary to popular belief, we *are* accountable to Parliament, albeit on a very discreet basis."

He paused for a moment and consulted his notes. He looked at me and switched on the tape recorder. He identified the tape with the date, his name and mine, but only referred to the other operatives by numbers. That done, he drew up a chair and sat down.

"So what happened?"

I paused for a moment and then began, giving the story of my meeting with Tamworth right up until Buckett's hasty departure.

"I'm glad that someone seemed to have some sense," murmured one of the SO-1 agents. I ignored him.

"Tamworth and I entered the lobby of Styx's property," I told them. "We took the stairs and on the sixth floor we heard the shot. We stopped and listened but there was complete silence. Tamworth thought we had been rumbled."

"You *had* been rumbled," announced Flanker. "From the transcript of the tape we know that Snood spoke Hades' name out loud. Hades picked it up and reacted badly; he accused Styx of betraying him, retrieved the package and then killed his brother. Your surprise attack was no surprise. He *knew* you were both there."

I took a sip of water. If we had known, would we have retreated? I doubted it.

"Who was in front?"

"Tamworth. We edged slowly around the stairwell and looked onto the seventh-floor landing. It was empty apart from a little old lady who was facing the lift doors and muttering angrily to herself. Tamworth and I edged closer to Styx's open door and peered in. Styx was lying on the floor and we quickly searched the small apartment."

"We saw you on the surveillance video, Next," said one of the nameless operatives. "Your search was conducted well."

"Did you see Hades on the video?"

The same man coughed. They had been having trouble coming to terms with Tamworth's report, but the video was unequivocal. Hades' likeness had not shown up on it at all--just his voice.

"No," he said finally. "No, we did not."

"Tamworth cursed and walked back to the door," I continued. "It was then that I heard another shot."

I stopped for a moment, remembering the event carefully, yet not fully understanding what I had seen and felt. I remembered that my heart rate had dropped; everything had suddenly become crystal clear. I had felt no panic, just an overwhelming desire to see the job completed. I had seen Tamworth die but had felt no emotion; that was to come later.

"Miss Next?" asked Flanker, interrupting my thoughts.

"What? Sorry. Tamworth was hit. I walked over but a quick glance confirmed that the wound was incompatible with survival. I had to assume Hades was on the landing, so I took a deep breath and glanced out."

"What did you see?"

"I saw the little old lady, standing by the lift. I had heard no one run off downstairs, so assumed Hades was on the roof. I glanced out again. The old lady gave up waiting and walked past me on her way to the stairs, splashing through a puddle of water on the way. She *tut-tutted* as she passed Tamworth's body. I switched my attention back to the landing and to the stairwell that led to the roof. As I walked slowly toward the roof access, a doubt crept into my mind. I turned back to look at the little old lady, who had started off down the stairs and was grumbling about the infrequency of trams. Her footprints from the water caught my eye. Despite her small feet, the wet footprints were made by a man's-size shoe. I required no more proof. It was Rule Number Two: Acheron could lie in thought, deed, action and *appearance*. For the first time ever, I fired a gun in anger."

There was silence, so I continued.

"I saw at least three of the four shots hit the lumbering figure on the stairs. The old lady--or, at the very least, her image--tumbled out of sight and I walked cautiously up to the head of the stairwell. Her belongings were strewn all the way down the concrete steps with her shopping trolley on the landing below. Her groceries had spilled out and several cans of cat food were rolling slowly down the steps."

"So you hit her?"

"Definitely."

Flanker dug a small evidence bag out of his pocket and showed it to me. It contained three of my slugs, flattened as though they had been fired into the side of a tank.

When Flanker spoke again his voice was edged with disbelief.

"You say that Acheron disguised himself as an old lady?"

"Yes, sir," I replied, looking straight ahead.

"How did he do that?"



"I don't know, sir."

"How could a man over six foot six dress in a small woman's clothes?"

"I don't think he did it *physically*; I think he just projected what he *wanted* me to see."

"That sounds crazy."

"There's a lot we don't know about Hades."

"*That* I can agree with. The old lady's name was Mrs. Grimswold; we found her wedged up the chimney in Styx's apartment. It took three men to pull her out."

Flanker thought for a moment and let one of the other men ask a question.

"I'm interested to know why you were both armed with expanding ammunition," said one of the other officers, not looking at me but at the wall. He was short and dark and had an annoying twitch in his left eye. "Fluted hollow points and high-power loads. What were you planning to shoot? Buffalo?"

I took a deep breath.

"Hades was shot six times without any ill effects in '77, sir. Tamworth gave us expanded ammunition to use against him. He said he had SO-1 approval."

"Well, he didn't. If the papers get hold of this there will be hell to pay. SpecOps doesn't have a good relationship with the press, Miss Next. *The Mole* keeps on wanting access for one of its journalists. In this climate of accountability the politicians are leaning on us more and more. Expanding ammunition!-- Shit, not even the Special Cavalry use those on Russians."

"That's what I said," I countered, "but having seen the state of these"--I shook the bag of flattened slugs--"I can see that Tamworth showed considerable restraint. We should have been carrying armor-piercing."

"Don't even think about it."

We had a break then. Flanker and the others vanished into the next room to argue while a nurse changed the dressing on my arm. I had been lucky; there had been no infection. I was thinking about Snood when they returned to resume the interview.

"As I walked carefully down the stairwell it was apparent that Acheron was now unarmed," I continued. "A nine-millimeter Beretta lay on the concrete steps next to a tin of custard powder. Of Acheron and the little old lady, there was no sign. On the landing I found a door to an apartment that had been pushed open with great force, shearing both hinge pins and the Chubb door bolt. I quickly questioned the occupants of the apartment but they were both insensible with laughter; it seemed Acheron had told them some sort

of a joke about three anteaters in a pub, and I got no sense out of either of them."

One of the operatives was slowly shaking her head.

"What is it now?" I asked indignantly.

"Neither of the two people you describe remember you or Hades coming through their apartment. All they recall is the door bursting open for no apparent reason. How do you account for this?"

I thought for a moment.

"Obviously, I can't. Perhaps he has control over the weak-minded. We still only have a small idea of this man's powers."

"Hmm," replied the operative thoughtfully. "To tell the truth, the couple *did* try to tell us the joke about the anteaters. We wondered about that."

"It wasn't funny, was it?"

"Not at all. But they seemed to think it was."

I was beginning to feel angry and didn't like the way the interview was going. I collected my thoughts and continued, arguing to myself that the sooner this was over, the better.

"I looked slowly around the apartment and found an open window in the bedroom. It led out onto the fire escape, and as I peered out I could see Acheron's form running down the rusty steps four floors below. I knew I couldn't catch him, and it was then that I saw Snood. He stumbled out from behind a parked car and pointed his revolver at Hades as he dropped to the ground. At the time, I didn't understand what he was doing there."

"But you know now?"

My heart sank.

"He was there for *me*."

I felt tears well up and then fought them down. I was damned if I was going to start crying like a baby in front of this bunch, so I expertly turned the sniff into a cough.

"He was there because he knew what he had done," said Flanker. "He knew that by speaking Hades' name out loud he had compromised you and Tamworth. We believe he was trying to make amends. At eighty-nine years of age, he was attempting to take on a man of superior strength, resolve and intellect. He was brave. He was stupid. Did you hear anything they said?"

"Not at first. I proceeded down the fire escape and heard Snood yell out 'Armed Police!' and 'On the ground!' By the time I reached the second floor, Hades had convinced Snood to give up his weapon and had shot him. I fired twice from where I was; Hades stumbled slightly but he soon recovered and sprinted for the nearest car. *My car*."

"What happened then?"

"I clambered down the ladder and dropped to the ground, landing

badly on some trash and twisting my ankle. I looked up and saw Acheron punch in the window of my car and open the door. It didn't take him much more than a couple of seconds to tear off the steering lock and start the engine. The street was, I knew, a cul-de-sac. If Acheron wanted to escape it would have to be through me. I hobbled out into the middle of the road and waited. I started firing as soon as he pulled away from the curb. All my shots hit their mark. Two in the windscreen and one in the radiator grille. The car kept accelerating and I kept firing. A wing mirror and the other headlamp shattered. The car would hit me if it carried on as it was, but I didn't really care anymore. The operation was a mess. Acheron had killed Tamworth and Snood. He'd kill countless others if I didn't give it my all. With my last shot I hit his offside front tire and Acheron finally lost control. The car hit a parked Studebaker and turned over, bounced along on its roof and finally teetered to a stop barely three feet from where I stood. It rocked unsteadily for a moment and then was still, the water from the radiator mixing with the petrol that leaked onto the road."

I took another sip of water and looked at the assembled faces. They were following my every word, but the hardest part of it was yet to come.

"I reloaded, then pulled open the driver's door of the upturned car. I had expected Acheron to tumble out in a heap, but Hades, not for the first time that night, had failed to live up to expectations. The car was empty."

"Did you see him escape?"

"No. I was just pondering this when I heard a familiar voice behind me. It was Buckett. He had returned.

" 'Where is he?' " Buckett yelled.

" 'I don't know,' I stammered in reply, checking the back of the car. 'He was here!--'

" 'Stay here!' shouted Buckett. 'I'm going to check around the front!'

"I was glad to be given orders and spared the burden of initiative. But as Buckett turned to leave he shimmered slightly and I knew something was wrong. Without hesitating, I shot Buckett in the back three times. He collapsed in a heap--"

"You shot *another* operative?" said one of the SO-1 crowd with an incredulous tone. "In the *back*?" I ignored her.

"--only it wasn't Buckett, of course. The figure that picked itself up from the road to face me was Acheron. He rubbed his back where I had hit him and smiled benignly.

" 'That wasn't very sporting!' he said with a smile.

" 'I'm not here for the sport,' I assured him."

One of the SO-1 officers interrupted me.

"You seem to shoot a lot of people in the back, Next. Point-blank

range with fluted slugs and he *survived*? I'm sorry, this is quite impossible!"

"It happened."

"She's lying!--" he said indignantly. "I've had just about enough of this!--"

But Flanker laid a hand on his arm to quieten him.

"Carry on, Miss Next."

I did.

" 'Hello, Thursday,' Hades said.

" 'Acheron,' I replied.

"He smiled.

" 'Tamworth's blood is getting cold on the concrete upstairs and it's all your fault. Just give me your gun and we can finish this all up and go home.'

"Hades reached out his hand and I felt a strong impulse to give him my weapon. But I had turned him down before when he was using more persuasive methods--when I was a student and he was a lecturer. Perhaps Tamworth knew I was strong enough to resist him; perhaps this was another reason he wanted me on his team. I don't know. Hades realized this and said instead in a genial manner:

" 'It's been a long time. Fifteen years, isn't it?'

" 'Summer of '69,' I replied grimly. I had little time for his games.

" 'Sixty-nine?' he asked, having thought about it for a moment. 'Sixteen years, then. I seem to remember we were quite chummy.'

" 'You were a brilliant teacher, Acheron. I've not met an intellect to compare with yours. Why all this?'

" 'I could say the same about you,' returned Acheron with a smile. 'You were the only student of mine whom I could ever describe as *brilliant*, yet here you are, working as a glorified plod; a LiteraTec; a lackey for the Network. What brought you to SO-5?'

" 'Fate.'

"There was a pause. Acheron smiled.

" 'I always liked you, Thursday. You turned me down and, as we all know, there is nothing more seductive than resistance. I often wondered what I'd do if we met again. My star pupil, my protegee. We were nearly lovers.'

" 'I was *never* your protegee, Hades.'

"He smiled again.

" 'Have you ever wanted a new car?' he asked me quite suddenly.

"I did, of course, and said so.

" 'How about a large house? How about *two* large houses? In the country. With grounds. *And* a Rembrandt.'

"I saw what he was up to.

" 'If you want to buy my compliance, Acheron, you have to choose

the right currency.'

"Acheron's face fell.

"You are strong, Thursday. Avarice works on most people.'

"I was angry now.

"What do you want with the *Chuzzlewit* manuscript, Acheron? To sell it?'

"Stealing and selling? How *common*,' he sneered. 'I'm sorry about your two friends. Hollow-points make quite a mess, don't they?'

"We stood there facing one another. It wouldn't be long before SO-14 were on the scene.

"On the ground,' I ordered him, 'or I swear I'll fire.'

"Hades was suddenly a blur of movement. There was a sharp crack and I felt something pluck at my upper arm. There was a sensation of warmth and I realized with a certain detached interest that I had been shot.

"Good try, Thursday. How about with the other arm?'

"Without knowing it, I had loosed off a shot in his direction. It was this that he was congratulating me on. I knew that I had thirty seconds at best before the loss of blood started to make me woozy. I transferred the automatic to my left hand and started to raise it again.

"Acheron smiled admiringly. He would have continued his brutal game for as long as he could but the distant wail of police sirens hastened him into action. He shot me once in the chest and left me for dead."

The SO-1 officials shuffled slightly as I concluded my story. They swapped looks, but I had no interest in whether they believed me or not. Hades had left me for dead but my time wasn't yet up. The copy of *Jane Eyre* that Tamworth had given me had saved my life. I had placed it in my breast pocket; Hades' slug had penetrated to the back cover but had not gone through. Broken ribs, a collapsed lung and a bruise to die for--but I had survived. It was luck, or fate, or whatever the hell you want to make of it.

"That's it?" asked Flanker.

I nodded.

"That's it."

It wasn't it, of course, there was a lot more, but none of it was relevant to them. I hadn't told them how Hades had used Filbert Snood's death to grind me down emotionally; that was how he managed to get the first shot in.

"That's about all we need to know, Miss Next. You can return to SO-27 as soon as you are able. I would remind you that you are bound by the confidentiality clause you signed. A misplaced word could have very poor consequences. Is there anything you would like to add

yourself?"

I took a deep breath.

"I know a lot of this sounds far-fetched, but it is the truth. I am the first witness who has seen what Hades will do to survive. Whoever pursues him in the future must be fully aware of what he is capable of.'

Flanker leaned back in his chair. He looked at the man with the twitch, who nodded in return.

"Academic, Miss Next."

"What do you mean?"

"Hades is dead. SO-14 are not complete losers despite a certain trigger-happiness. They pursued him up the M4 that night until he crashed his car by junction twelve. It rolled down an embankment and burst into flames. We didn't want to tell you until we'd heard your evidence."

The news hit me squarely and hard. Revenge had been a prime emotion keeping me together over the past two weeks. Without a burning desire to see Hades punished, I might not even have made it at all. Without Acheron all my testimony would be left unproven. I hadn't expected it all to be believed, but at least I could look forward to being vindicated when others came across him.

"Sorry?" I asked suddenly.

"I said that Hades was dead."

"No he isn't," I said without thinking.

Flanker supposed that my reaction was the effect of traumatic shock.

"It might be difficult to come to terms with, but he is. Burned almost beyond recognition. We had to identify him by dental records. He still had Snood's pistol with him."

"The *Chuzzlewit* manuscript?"

"No sign--we think destroyed as well."

I looked down. The whole operation had been a fiasco.

"Miss Next," said Flanker, standing up and laying a hand on my shoulder, "you will be pleased to hear that none of this will be published below SO-8. You can return to your unit without a blemish on your record. There were errors, but none of us have any idea how anything might have turned out given a different set of circumstances. As for us, you won't be seeing us again.'

He turned off the cassette recorder, wished me good health and walked out of the room. The other officers joined him, except for the man with the twitch. He waited until his colleagues were out of earshot then whispered to me:

"I think your testimony is bullshit, Miss Next. The service can ill afford to lose the likes of Phillip Tamworth."

"Thank you."

"What for?"

"For telling me his first name."

The man moved to say something, thought the better of it and then left.

I got up from the table in the impromptu interview room and stared out of the window. It was warm and sunny outside and the trees swayed gently in the breeze; the world looked as though it had little room for people like Hades. I allowed the thoughts of the night to come back again. The part I hadn't told them was about Snood. Acheron had talked some more that night. He had indicated the tired and worn body of Snood and said:

"Filbert asked me to say he was sorry."

"That's Filbert's father!--" I corrected him.

"No," he chuckled. "That was Filbert."

I looked at Snood again. He was lying on his back with his eyes open and the likeness was unmistakable, despite the sixty-year age gap.

"Oh my God, no! Filbert? Was that him?"

Acheron seemed to be enjoying himself.

" 'Unavoidably detained' is a ChronoGuard euphemism for a time aggregation, Thursday. I'm surprised you didn't know that. Caught outside the herenow. Sixty years piled onto him in less than a minute. It's little surprise he didn't want you to see him."

There hadn't been any girl in Tewkesbury after all. I had heard about time dilations and temporal instabilities from my father. In the world of the Event, the Cone and the Horizon, Filbert Snood had been unavoidably detained. The tragedy of it was, he never felt he could tell me. It was then, as I hit my lowest, that Acheron had turned and fired. It was as he had planned it.

I walked slowly back to my room and sat on the bed feeling utterly dejected. Tears come easily to me when no one is about. I wept copiously for about five minutes and felt a great deal better, blew my nose noisily then switched on the television as a distraction. I rattled through the channels until I chanced across the Toad News Network. It was more about the Crimea, of course.

"Still on the subject of the Crimea," announced the anchorwoman, "the Goliath Corporation Special Weapons Division has unveiled the latest weapon in the struggle against the Russian aggressors. It is hoped that the new Ballistic Plasma Energy Rifle--code-named 'Stonk'--will be the decisive weapon to change the tide of the war. Our defense correspondent James Backbiter takes us through it."

The scene changed to a close-up of an exotic-looking weapon

handled by a soldier in military SpecOps uniform.

"This is the new Stonk plasma rifle, unveiled today by the Goliath Special Weapons Division," announced Backbiter, standing next to the soldier on what was obviously a test range. "We can't tell you very much about it for obvious reasons, but we can show its effectiveness and report that it uses a bolt of concentrated energy to destroy armor and personnel up to a mile away."

I watched in horror as the soldier demonstrated the new weapon. Invisible bolts of energy tore into the target tank with the power of ten of our howitzers. It was like an artillery piece in the palm of your hand. The barrage ended and Backbiter asked a colonel a couple of obviously posed questions as soldiers paraded with the new weapon in the background.

"When do you suppose the frontline troops will be issued with Stonk?"

"The first weapons are being shipped now. The rest will be supplied just as soon as we can set up the necessary factories."

"And finally, its effect on the conflict?"

A small amount of emotion flickered on the colonel's face.

"I predict Stonk will have the Russians suing for peace within a month."

"Oh, *shit*," I murmured out loud. I'd heard this particular phrase many times during my time in the military. It had supplanted the hoary old "over by Christmas" for sheer fatuousness. It had always, without exception, been followed by an appalling loss of life.

Even before the first deployment of the new weapon, its mere existence had upset the balance of power in the Crimea. No longer keen on a withdrawal, the English government was trying to negotiate a surrender of all Russian troops. The Russians were having none of it. The UN had demanded that both sides return to the talks in Budapest, but it had all stalled; the Imperial Russian Army had dug themselves in against the expected onslaught. Earlier in the day the Goliath Special Weapons spokesman had been instructed to appear before Parliament to explain the delay of the new weapons, as they were now a month behind schedule.

A screech of tires roused me from my thoughts. I looked up. In the middle of the hospital room was a brightly painted sports car. I blinked twice but it didn't vanish. There was no earthly reason why it should be in the room or even any evidence as to how it got there, the door being only wide enough for a bed, but there it was. I could smell the exhaust and hear the engine ticking over, but for some reason I did not find it at all unusual. The occupants were staring at me. The driver was a woman in her midthirties who looked sort of familiar.



"Thursday!--" cried the driver with a sense of urgency in her voice.

I frowned. It all *looked* real and I was definitely sure I had seen the driver somewhere before. The passenger, a young man in a suit whom I didn't know, waved cheerily.

"He didn't die!" said the woman, as though she wouldn't have long to speak. "The car crash was a blind! Men like Acheron don't die that easily! Take the Litera Tec job in Swindon!"

"Swindon?--" I echoed. I thought I had escaped that town--it afforded me a few too many painful memories.

I opened my mouth to speak but there was another screech of rubber and the car departed, folding up rather than fading out until there was nothing left but the echo of the tires and the faint smell of exhaust. Pretty soon that had gone too, leaving no clue as to its strange appearance. I held my head in my hands. The driver had been *very* familiar. It had been me.

My arm was almost healed by the time the internal inquiry circulated its findings. I wasn't permitted to read it but I wasn't bothered. If I had known what was in it, I would probably only have been more dissatisfied and annoyed than I was already. Boswell had visited me again to tell me I had been awarded six months' sick leave before returning, but it didn't help. I didn't want to return to the Litera Tec's office; at least, not in London.

"What are you going to do?" asked Paige. She had turned up to help me pack before I was discharged from the hospital.

"Six months' leave can be a long time if you've got no hobbies or family or boyfriend," she went on. She could be very direct at times.

"I have lots of hobbies."

"Name *one*."

"Painting."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. I'm currently painting a seascape."

"How long has it taken you so far?"

"About seven years."

"It must be very good."

"It's a piece of crap."

"Seriously, though," said Turner, who had become closer to me in these past few weeks than during the entire time we had known each other, "what are you going to do?"

I handed her the SpecOps 27 gazette; it outlined postings around the country. Paige looked at the entry that I had circled in red ink.

"Swindon?"

"Why not? It's home."

"Home it might be," replied Turner, "but weird it *definitely* is." She

tapped the job description. "It's only for an operative-- you've been acting inspector for over three years!"

"Three and a half. It doesn't matter. I'm going."

I didn't tell Paige the real reason. It could have been a coincidence, of course, but the advice from the driver of the car had been most specific: *Take the LiteraTec job in Swindon!* Perhaps the vision had been real after all; the gazette with the job offer had arrived *after* the visitation by the car. If it had been right about the job in Swindon, it stood to reason that perhaps the news about Hades was also correct. Without any further thought, I had applied. I couldn't tell Paige about the car; if she had known, friendship notwithstanding, she would have reported me to Boswell. Boswell would have spoken to Flanker and all sorts of unpleasantness might have happened. I was getting quite good at concealing the truth, and I felt happier now than I had for months.

"We'll miss you in the department, Thursday."

"It'll pass."

"I'll miss you."

"Thanks, Paige, I appreciate it. I'll miss you too."

We hugged, she told me to keep in touch, and left the room, pager bleeping.

I finished packing and thanked the nursing staff, who gave me a brown paper parcel as I was about to leave.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It belonged to whoever saved your life that night."

"What do you mean?"

"A passerby attended to you before the medics arrived; the wound in your arm was plugged and they wrapped you in their coat to keep you warm. Without their intervention you might well have bled to death."

Intrigued, I opened the package. Firstly, there was a handkerchief that despite several washings still bore the stains of my own blood. There was an embroidered monogram in the corner that read EFR. Secondly the parcel contained a jacket, a sort of casual evening coat that might have been very popular in the middle of the last century. I searched the pockets and found a bill from a milliner. It was made out to one Edward Fairfax Rochester, Esq., and was dated 1833. I sat down heavily on the bed and stared at the two articles of clothing and the bill. Ordinarily I would not have believed that Rochester could have torn himself from the pages of *Jane Eyre* and come to my aid that night; such a thing is, of course, quite impossible. I might have dismissed the whole thing as a ludicrously complicated prank had it not been for one thing: Edward Rochester and I had met once before .

## 6.

### *Jane Eyre: A Short Excursion into the Novel*

Outside Styx's apartment was not the first time Rochester and I had met, nor would it be the last. We first encountered each other at Haworth House in Yorkshire when my mind was young and the barrier between reality and make-believe had not yet hardened into the shell that cocoons us in adult life. The barrier was soft, pliable and, for a moment, thanks to the kindness of a stranger and the power of a good storytelling voice, I made the short journey--and returned.

THURSDAY NEXT

--*A Life in SpecOps*

IT WAS 1958. My uncle and aunt--who even then seemed old--had taken me up to Haworth House, the old Bronte residence, for a visit. I had been learning about William Thackeray at school, and since the Brontes were contemporaries of his it seemed a good opportunity to further my interest in these matters. My Uncle Mycroft was giving a lecture at Bradford University on his remarkable mathematical work regarding game theory, the most practical side of which allowed one to win at Snakes and Ladders every time. Bradford was near to Haworth, so a combined visit seemed a good idea.

We were led around by the guide, a fluffy woman in her sixties with steel-rimmed spectacles and an angora cardigan who steered the tourists around the rooms with an abrupt manner, as though she felt that none of them could possibly know as much as she did, but would grudgingly assist to lift them from the depths of their own ignorance. Near the end of the tour, when thoughts had turned to picture postcards and ice cream, the prize exhibit in the form of the original manuscript of *Jane Eyre* greeted the tired museum-goers.

Although the pages had browned with age and the black ink faded to a light brown, the writing could still be read by the practiced eye, the fine spidery longhand flowing across the page in a steady stream of inventive prose. A page was turned every two days, allowing the more regular and fanatical Bronte followers to read the novel as originally drafted.

The day that I came to the Bronte museum the manuscript was open at the point where Jane and Rochester first meet; a chance encounter by a stile.

"--which makes it one of the greatest romantic novels ever written," continued the fluffy yet lofty guide in her oft-repeated monologue, ignoring several hands that had been raised to ask pertinent questions.

"The character of Jane Eyre, a tough and resilient heroine, drew her apart from the usual heroines of the time, and Rochester, a forbidding yet basically good man, also broke the mold with his flawed character's dour humor. *Jane Eyre* was written by Charlotte Bronte in 1847 under the pseudonym Currer Bell. Thackeray described it as 'the master work of a great genius.' We continue on now to the shop where you may purchase picture postcards, commemorative plates, small plastic imitation Heathcliffs and other mementos of your visit. Thank you for--"

One of the group had their hand up and was determined to have his say.

"Excuse me," began the young man in an American accent. A muscle in the tour guide's cheek momentarily twitched as she forced herself to listen to someone else's opinion.

"Yes?" she inquired with icy politeness.

"Well," continued the young man, "I'm kinda new to this whole Bronte thing, but I had trouble with the end of *Jane Eyre*."

"Trouble?"

"Yeah. Like Jane leaves Thornfield Hall and hitches up with her cousins, the Riverses."

"I know who her cousins are, young man."

"Yeah, well, she agrees to go with this drippy St. John Rivers guy but not to marry him, they depart for India and that's the end of the book? Hello? What about a happy ending? What happens to Rochester and his nutty wife?"

The guide glowered.

"And what would you prefer? The forces of good and evil fighting to the death in the corridors of Thornfield Hall?"

"That's not what I meant," continued the young man, beginning to get slightly annoyed. "It's just that the book cries out for a strong resolution, to tie up the narrative and finish the tale. I get the feeling from what she wrote that she just kinda pooped out."

The guide stared at him for a moment through her steel-rimmed glasses and wondered why the visitors couldn't behave just that little bit more like sheep. Sadly, his point was a valid one; she herself had often pondered the diluted ending, wishing, like millions of others, that circumstances had allowed Jane and Rochester to marry after all.

"Some things will never be known," she replied noncommittally. Charlotte is no longer with us so the question is abstract. What we have to study and enjoy is what she has left us. The sheer exuberance of the writing easily outweighs any of its small shortcomings."

The young American nodded and the small crowd moved on, my aunt and uncle among them. I hung back until only I and a single Japanese tourist were left in the room; I then tried to look at the

original manuscript on tiptoe. It was tricky, as I was small for my age.

"Would you like me to read it for you?" said a kindly voice close at hand. It was the Japanese tourist. She smiled at me and I thanked her for her trouble.

She checked that no one was around, unfolded her reading glasses and started to speak. She spoke excellent English and had a fine reading voice; the words peeled off the page into my imagination as she spoke.

. . . In those days I was young and all sorts of fancies bright and dark tenanted my mind; the memories of nursery stories were there among other rubbish; and when they recurred, maturing youth added to them a vigor and vividness beyond what childhood could give . . .

I closed my eyes and a thin chill suddenly filled the air around me. The tourist's voice was clear now, as though speaking in the open air, and when I opened my eyes the museum had gone. In its place was a country lane of another place entirely. It was a fine winter's evening and the sun was just dipping below the horizon. The air was perfectly still, the color washed from the scene. Apart from a few birds that stirred occasionally in the hedge, no movement punctuated the starkly beautiful landscape. I shivered as I saw my own breath in the crisp air, zipped up my jacket and regretted that I had left my hat and mittens on the peg downstairs. As I looked about I could see that I was not alone. Barely ten feet away a young woman, dressed in a cloak and bonnet, was sitting on a stile watching the moon that had just risen behind us. When she turned I could see that her face was plain and outwardly unremarkable, yet possessed of a bearing that showed inner strength and resolve. I stared at her intently with a mixture of feelings. I had realized not long ago that I myself was no beauty, and even at the age of nine had seen how the more attractive children gained favor more easily. But here in that young woman I could see how those principles could be inverted. I felt myself stand more upright and clench my jaw in subconscious mimicry of her pose.

I was just thinking about asking her where the museum had gone when a sound in the lane made us both turn. It was an approaching horse, and the young woman seemed startled for a moment. The lane was narrow, and I stepped back to give the horse room to pass. As I waited, a large black-and-white dog rushed along the hedge, nosing the ground for anything of interest. The dog ignored the figure on the stile but stopped dead in his tracks when he saw me. His tail wagged enthusiastically and he bounded over, sniffing me inquisitively, his hot breath covering me in a warm cloak and his whiskers tickling my cheek. I giggled and the dog wagged his tail even harder. He had

sniffed along this hedge during every single reading of the book for over 130 years, but had never come across anything that smelled so, well . . . *real*. He licked me several times with great affection. I giggled again and pushed him away, so he ran off to find a stick.

From subsequent readings of the book I was later to realize that the dog Pilot had never had the opportunity to fetch a stick, his appearances in the book being all too few, so he was obviously keen to take the opportunity when it presented itself. He must have known, almost instinctively, that the little girl who had momentarily appeared at the bottom of page eighty-one was unfettered by the rigidity of the narrative. He knew that he could stretch the boundaries of the story a small amount, sniffing along one side of the lane or the other since it wasn't specified; but if the text stated that he had to bark or run around or jump up, then he was obliged to comply. It was a long and repetitive existence, which made the rare appearances of people like me that much more enjoyable.

I looked up and noticed that the horse and rider had just passed the young woman. The rider was a tall man with distinguished features and a careworn face, bent into a frown by some musings that seemed to envelop him in thoughtful detachment. He had not seen my small form and the safe route down the lane led right through where I was standing; opposite me was a treacherous slab of ice. Within a few moments the horse was upon me, the heavy hooves thumping the hard ground, the hot breath from its velvety nose blowing on my face. Suddenly, the rider, perceiving the small girl in his path for the first time, uttered: "What the deuce--" and reined his horse rapidly to the left, away from me but onto the slippery ice. The horse lost its footing and went crashing to the ground. I took a step back, mortified at the accident I had caused. The horse struggled to gain a footing and the dog, hearing the commotion, returned to the scene, presented me with a stick and then barked at the fallen group excitedly, his deep growl echoing in the still evening. The young woman approached the fallen man with grave concern on her face. She was eager to be of assistance and spoke for the first time.

"Are you injured, sir?"

The rider muttered something incomprehensible and ignored her completely.

"Can I do anything?" she asked again.

"You must just stand on one side," answered the rider in a gruff tone as he rose shakily to his feet. The young woman stepped back as the rider helped his horse recover with a clattering and stamping of hooves. He silenced the dog with a shout and then stopped to feel his leg; it was obvious that he had hurt it quite badly. I felt sure that a man of such dour demeanor must surely be very angry with me, yet

when he espied me again he smiled kindly and gave me a broad wink, placing a finger to his lips to ensure my silence. I smiled back, and the rider turned to face the young woman, his brow furrowing once more into a grimace as he fell back into character.

High in the evening sky I could hear a distant voice calling my name. The voice grew louder and the sky darkened. The cold air warmed on my face as the lane evaporated, the horse, rider, young woman and the dog returning to the pages of the book whence they had sprung. The room in the museum faded in about me and the images and smells transformed back into the spoken word as the woman finished the sentence.

. . . for he halted to the stile whence I had just risen and sat down  
. . .

"Thursday!" cried my Aunt Polly crossly. "*Do* try to keep up. I'll be asking questions later!"

She took me by the hand and led me away. I turned and waved my thanks to the Japanese tourist, who smiled genially back at me.

I returned to the museum a few times after that but the magic never worked again. My mind had closed too much by the time I was twelve, already a young woman. I only ever spoke of it to my uncle, who nodded sagely and believed every word. I never told anyone else. Ordinary adults don't like children to speak of things that are denied them by their own gray minds.

As I got older I started to doubt the validity of my own memory, until by my eighteenth birthday I had written it off as the product of an overactive imagination. Rochester's reappearance outside Styx's apartment that night served only to confuse. Reality, to be sure, was beginning to bend.

## 7. The Goliath Corporation

. . . No one would argue that we owe a debt of gratitude to the Goliath Corporation. They helped us to rebuild after the Second War and it should not be forgotten. Of late, however, it seems as though the Goliath Corporation is falling far short of its promises of fairness and altruism. We are finding ourselves now in the unfortunate position of continuing to pay back a debt that has long since been paid--with interest . . .

Speech to Parliament by English Goliathsceptic  
SAMUEL PRING

**I** was in the SpecOps Memorial Cemetery in Highgate looking at Snood's headstone. It read:

Filbert R. Snood  
A fine operative who gave his  
years in the line of duty.  
*Time waits for no man*  
SO-12 & SO-5  
1953-1985

They say the job ages you--and it had aged Filbert a lot. Perhaps it had been for the best when he didn't call after the accident. It couldn't have worked and the breakup when it came--as it surely would--might have been too painful. I placed a small stone atop his headstone and bid him adieu.

"You were lucky," said a voice. I turned and saw a short man in an expensive suit sitting on the bench opposite.

"I'm sorry?" I asked, taken aback by the intrusion into my thoughts. The small man smiled and stared at me intently.

"I'd like to speak to you about Acheron, Miss Next."

"It's one of the rivers that flow to the underworld," I told him. "Try the local library under Greek mythology."

"I was referring to the person."

I stared at him for a moment, trying to figure out who he was. He wore a small porkpie hat balanced on top of a rounded head that had been crew cut like a tennis ball. His features were sharp, his lips thin, and he was not what you'd call an attractive-looking human being. He sported heavy gold jewelry and a diamond tiepin that twinkled like a star. His patent-leather brogues were covered in white spats and a gold watch chain dangled from his waistcoat pocket. He was not



alone. A young man also in a dark suit with a bulge where a pistol should be was standing next to him. I had been so wrapped up in my own thoughts I hadn't noticed them approach. I figured they were SpecOps Internal Affairs or something; I guessed that Flanker and Co. weren't finished with me yet.

"Hades is dead," I replied simply, unwilling to get embroiled.

"You don't seem to think so."

"Yeah, well, I've been given six months off due to work-related stress. The shrink reckons I'm suffering from false memory syndrome and hallucinations. I shouldn't believe anything I say, if I were you--and that includes what I just told you."

The small man smiled again, displaying a large gold tooth.

"I don't believe you're suffering from stress at all, Miss Next. I think you're as sane as I am. If someone who survived the Crimea, the police and then eight years of tricky LiteraTec work came to me and told me that Hades was still alive, I'd listen to them."

"And who might you be?"

He handed me a gold-edged card with the dark blue Goliath Corporation logo embossed on it.

"The name's Schitt," he replied. "Jack Schitt."

I shrugged. The card told me he was head of Goliath's internal security service, a shadowy organization that was well outside government; by constitutional decree they were answerable to no one. The Goliath Corporation had honorary members in both houses and financial advisers at the Treasury. The judiciary was well represented with Goliath people on the selection panel for High Court judges, and most major universities had a Goliath overseer living within the faculty. No one ever noticed how much they influenced the running of the country, which perhaps shows how good at it they were. Yet, for all Goliath's outward benevolence, there were murmurs of dissent over the Corporation's continued privilege. Their public servants were unelected by the people or the government and their activities enshrined in statute. It was a brave politician who dared to voice disquiet.

I sat next to him on the bench. He dismissed his henchman.

"So what's your interest in Hades, Mr. Schitt?"

"I want to know if he's alive or dead."

"You read the coroner's report, didn't you?"

"It only told me that a man of Hades' height, stature and teeth was incinerated in a car. Hades has got out of worse scrapes than that. I read *your* report; *much* more interesting. Quite why those clowns in SO-1 dismissed it out of hand I have no idea. With Tamworth dead you're the only operative who knows anything about him. I'm not really concerned about whose fault it was that night. What I want to

know is this: What was Acheron going to do with the manuscript of *Martin Chuzzlewit*?"

"Extortion, perhaps?" I ventured.

"Possibly. Where is it now?"

"Wasn't it with him?"

"No," replied Schitt evenly. "In your testimony you said he took it with him in a leather case. No trace was found of it in the burned-out car. If he *did* survive, so did the manuscript."

I looked at him blankly, wondering where all this was going.

"He must have passed it to an accomplice, then."

"Possibly. The manuscript could be worth up to five million on the black market, Miss Next. A lot of money, don't you think?"

"What are you suggesting?" I asked sharply, my temper rising.

"Nothing at all; but your testimony and Acheron's corpse don't really add up, do they? You said that you shot him after he killed the young officer."

"His name was Snood," I said pointedly.

"Whoever. But the burned corpse had no gunshot wounds despite the many times you shot him when he was disguised as Buckett or the old woman."

"Her name was Mrs. Grimswold."

I stared at him. Schitt continued.

"I saw the flattened slugs. You would have got the same effect if you had fired them into a wall."

"If you have a point, why don't you get to it?"

Schitt unscrewed the cap of a Thermos flask and offered it to me. I refused; he poured himself a drink and continued:

"I think you know more than you say you do. We only have your word for the events of that night. Tell me, Miss Next, what was Hades planning to use the manuscript for?"

"I told you: I have no idea."

"Then why are you going to work as a Litera Tec in Swindon?"

"It was all I could get."

"That's not true. Your work has been consistently assessed above average and your record states that you haven't been back to Swindon in ten years despite your family living there. A note appended to your file speaks of 'romantic tensions'. Man trouble in Swindon?"

"None of your business."

"In my line of work I find there is very little that *isn't* my business. There are a host of other things a woman with your talents could do, but to go back to Swindon? Something tells me you have another motive."

"Does it really say all that in my file?"

"It does."

"What color are my eyes?"

Schitt ignored me and took a sip of coffee.

"Colombian. The best. You think Hades is alive, Next. I think you have an idea where he is and I'm willing to guess that he is in Swindon and that's why you're going there. Am I correct?"

I looked him straight in the eye.

"No. I'm just going home to sort myself out."

Jack Schitt remained unconvinced.

"I don't believe there is such a thing as stress, Next. Just weak people and strong people. Only strong people survive men like Hades. You're a strong person."

He paused.

"If you change your mind, you can call me. But be warned. I'll be keeping a close eye on you."

"Do as you will, Mr. Schitt, but I've got a question for you."

"Yes?"

"What's *your* interest in Hades?"

Jack Schitt smiled again.

"I'm afraid that's classified, Miss Next. Good-day."

He tipped his hat, rose and left. A black Ford with smoked-glass windows pulled up outside the cemetery and drove him quickly away.

I sat and thought. I had lied to the police psychiatrist in saying I was fit for work and lied to Jack Schitt in saying that I wasn't. If Goliath was interested in Hades and the *Chuzzlewit* manuscript, it could only be for financial gain. The Goliath Corporation was to altruism what Genghis Khan was to soft furnishings. Money came first to Goliath and nobody trusted them farther than they could throw them. They may have rebuilt England after the Second War, they may have reestablished the economy. But sooner or later the renewed nation had to stand on its own and Goliath was seen now as less of a benevolent uncle than a despotic stepfather.

## 8.

### Airship to Swindon

. . . There is no point in expending good money on the pursuit of an engine that can power aircraft without propellers. What is wrong with airships anyway? They have borne mankind aloft for over a hundred relatively accident-free years and I see no reason to impugn their popularity . . .

Congresswoman Kelly, arguing against parliamentary  
funds for the development of a new form of propulsion,  
August 1972

I TOOK a small twenty-seater airship to Swindon. It was only half-full and a brisk tailwind allowed us to make good time. The train would have been cheaper, but like many people I love to fly by gasbag. I had, when I was a little girl, been taken on an immense clipper-class airship to Africa by my parents. We had flown slowly across France, over the Eiffel Tower, past Lyon, stopped at Nice, then traveled across the sparkling Mediterranean, waving at fishermen and passengers in ocean liners who waved back. We had stopped at Cairo after circling the Pyramids with infinite grace, the captain expertly maneuvering the leviathan with the skillful use of the twelve fully orientable propellers. We had continued up the Nile three days later to Luxor, where we joined a cruise ship for the return to the coast. Here we boarded the *Ruritania* for the return to England, by way of the Straits of Gibraltar and the Bay of Biscay. Little wonder that I tried to return to the fond memories of my childhood as often as I could.

"Magazine, ma'am?" asked a steward.

I declined. In-flight airship magazines were always dull, and I was quite happy just to watch the English landscape slide past beneath me. It was a glorious sunny day, and the airship droned past the small puffy clouds that punctuated the sky like a flock of aerial sheep. The Chilterns had risen to meet us and then dropped away as we swept past Wallingford, Didcot and Wantage. The Uffington White Horse drifted below me, bringing back memories of picnics and courting. Landen and I had often been there.

"Corporal Next?--" inquired a familiar voice. I turned to find a middle-aged man standing in the aisle, a half-smile on his face. I knew instantly who it was, even though we had not met for twelve years.

"Major!--" I responded, stiffening slightly in the presence of someone who had once been my superior officer. His name was Phelps, and I

had been under his command the day the Light Armored Brigade had advanced into the Russian guns in error as they sought to repulse an attack on Balaclava. I had been the driver of the armored personnel carrier under Phelps; it had not been a happy time.

The airship started the slow descent into Swindon.

"How have you been, Next?" he asked, our past association dictating the way in which we spoke to one another.

"I've been well, sir. Yourself?"

"Can't complain." He laughed. "Well, I could, but it wouldn't do any good. The damn fools made me a colonel, dontcha know it."

"Congratulations," I said, slightly uneasily.

The steward asked us to fasten our seat belts and Phelps sat down next to me and snapped on the buckle. He carried on talking in a slightly lower voice.

"I'm a bit concerned about the Crimea."

"Who isn't?" I countered, wondering if Phelps had changed his politics since the last time we had met.

"Quite. It's these UN johnnies poking their noses where they're not welcome. Makes all those lives seem wasted if we give it back now."

I sighed. His politics *hadn't* changed and I didn't want an argument. I had wanted the war finished almost as soon as I got out there. It didn't fit into my idea of what a *just* war should be. Pushing Nazis out of Europe had been *just*. The fight over the Crimean Peninsula was nothing but xenophobic pride and misguided patriotism.

"How's the hand?" I asked.

Phelps showed me a lifelike left hand. He rotated the wrist and then wiggled the fingers. I was impressed.

"Remarkable, isn't it?" he said. "They take the impulses from a sensor thingummy strapped to the muscles in the upper arm. If I'd lost the blasted thing above the elbow I'd have looked a proper Charlie."

He paused for a moment and returned to his first subject.

"I'm a bit concerned that public pressure might have the government pulling the plug before the offensive."

"Offensive?"

Colonel Phelps smiled.

"Of course. I have friends higher up who tell me it's only a matter of days before the first shipment of the new plasma rifles arrives. Do you think the Russians will be able to defend themselves against Stonk?"

"Frankly, no; that is unless they have their own version."

"Not a chance. Goliath is the most advanced weapons company in the world. Believe me, I'm hoping as much as the next man that we never have to use it, but Stonk is the high ground this conflict has been waiting for."

He rummaged in his briefcase and pulled out a leaflet.

"I'm touring England giving pro-Crimea talks. I'd like you to come along."

"I don't really think--" I began, taking the leaflet anyway.

"Nonsense!" replied Colonel Phelps. "As a healthy and successful veteran of the campaign it is your duty to give voice to those that made the ultimate sacrifice. If we give the peninsula back, every single one of those lives will have been lost in vain."

"I think, sir, that those lives have already been lost and no decision we can make in any direction can change that."

He pretended not to hear and I lapsed into silence. Colonel Phelps's rabid support of the conflict had been his way of dealing with the disaster. The order was given to charge against what we were told would be a "token resistance" but turned out to be massed Russian field artillery. Phelps had ridden the APC on the outside until the Russians opened up with everything they had; a shell-burst had taken his lower arm off and peppered his back with shrapnel. We had loaded him up with as many other soldiers as we could, driving back to the English lines with the carrier a mound of groaning humanity. I had gone back into the carnage against orders, driving among the shattered armor looking for survivors. Of the seventy-six APCs and light tanks that advanced into the Russian guns, only two vehicles returned. Out of the 534 soldiers involved, 51 survived, only 8 of them completely uninjured. One of the dead had been Anton Next, my brother. Disaster doesn't even *begin* to describe it.

Fortunately for me the airship docked soon after and I was able to avoid Colonel Phelps in the airfield lounge. I picked up my case from baggage retrieval and stayed locked in the ladies' until I thought he had gone. I tore his leaflet into tiny pieces and flushed them down the toilet. The airfield lounge was empty when I came out. It was bigger than was required for the amount of traffic that came to town; an off-white elephant that reflected the dashed hopes of Swindon's town planners. The concourse outside was similarly deserted except for two students holding an anti-Crimea war banner. They had heard of Phelps's arrival and hoped that they could turn him from his prowar campaigning. They had two chances: fat and slim.

They looked at me and I turned quickly away. If they knew who Phelps was, they might quite conceivably know who I was as well. I looked around the empty pickup point. I had spoken on the phone to Victor Analogy--the head of the Swindon LiteraTecs--and he had offered to send a car to pick me up. It hadn't arrived. It was hot, so I removed my jacket. A looped recording came over the Tannoy exhorting nonexistent drivers not to park in the deserted white zone, and a bored-looking worker came by and returned a few trolleys. I sat

down next to a Will-Speak machine at the far end of the concourse. The last time I was in Swindon the airship park had been simply a grass field with a rusty mast. I guessed that much else had changed too.

I waited five minutes, then stood and paced impatiently up and down. The Will-Speak machine--officially known as a Shakespeare Soliloquy Vending Automaton--was of *Richard III*. It was a simple box, with the top half glazed and inside a realistic mannequin visible from the waist up in suitable attire. The machine would dispense a short snippet of Shakespeare for ten pence. They hadn't been manufactured since the thirties and were now something of a rarity; Baconic vandalism and a lack of trained maintenance were together hastening their demise.

I dug out a ten-pence piece and inserted it. There was a gentle whirring and clicking from within as the machine wound itself up to speed. There had been a *Hamlet* version on the corner of Commercial Road when I was small. My brother and I had pestered our mother for loose change and listened to the mannequin refer to things we couldn't really understand. It told us of "the undiscovered country." My brother, in his childish nae vete, had said he wanted to visit such a place, and he did, seventeen years later, in a mad dash sixteen hundred miles from home, the only sound the roar of engines and the *crump-crump-crump* of the Russian guns.

*Was ever woman in this humor wooed?* asked the mannequin, rolling its eyes crazily as it stuck one finger in the air and lurched from side to side.

*Was ever woman in this humor won?*

It paused for effect.

*I'll have her, but I'll not keep her long . . .*

"Excuse me?--"

I looked up. One of the students had walked up and touched me on the arm. He wore a peace button in his lapel and had a pair of pince-nez glasses perched precariously on his large nose.

"You're Next, aren't you?"

"Next for what?"

"Corporal Next, Light Armored Brigade."

I rubbed my brow.

"I'm not here with the colonel. It was a coincidence."

"I don't believe in coincidences."

"Neither do I. That's a coincidence, isn't it?"

The student looked at me oddly as his girlfriend joined him. He told her who I was.

"You were the one who *went back*," she marveled, as though I were a rare stuffed parakeet. "It was against a direct order. They were going

to court-martial you."

"Well, they didn't, did they?"

"Not when *The Owl on Sunday* got wind of your story. I've read your testimony at the inquiry. You're antiwar."

The two students looked at one another as if they couldn't believe their good fortune.

"We need someone to talk at Colonel Phelps's rally," said the young man with the big nose. "Someone from the other side. Someone who has been there. Someone with clout. Would you do that for us?"

"No."

"Why not?"

I looked around to see if, by a miracle, my lift had arrived. It hadn't. . . . *Whom I*, continued the mannequin, *some three months hence, stabbed in my angry mood at Tewkesbury?*

"Listen, guys, I'd love to help you, but I can't. I've spent twelve years trying to forget. Speak to some other vet. There are thousands of us."

"Not like you, Miss Next. *You* survived the charge. You went back to get your fallen comrades out. One of the fifty-one. It's your *duty* to speak on behalf of those that didn't make it."

"Bullshit. My duty is to myself. I survived the charge and have lived with it every single day since. Every night I ask myself: Why me? Why did I live and the others, my brother even, die? There is no answer to that question and that's only just where the pain *starts*. I can't help you."

"You don't have to speak," said the girl persistently, "but better for one old wound to open than a thousand new ones, eh?"

"Don't teach me morality, you little shit," I said, my voice rising.

It had the desired effect. She handed me a leaflet, took her boyfriend by the arm, and departed.

I closed my eyes. My heart was beating like the *crump-crump-crump* of the Russian field artillery. I didn't hear the squad car pull up beside me.

"Officer Next?--" asked a cheery voice.

I turned and nodded gratefully, picked up my case and walked over. The officer in the car smiled at me. He had long dreadlocked hair and a pair of overly large dark glasses. His uniform was open at the collar in an uncharacteristically casual way for a SpecOps officer, and he wore a goodly amount of jewelry, also strictly against SpecOps guidelines.

"Welcome to Swindon, Officer! The town where anything can happen and probably will!"

He smiled broadly and jerked a thumb toward the rear of the car.

"Trunk's open."

The boot contained a lot of iron stakes, several mallets, a large



crucifix and a pick and shovel. There was also a musty smell, the smell of mold and the long dead--I hurriedly threw in my bag and slammed the boot lid down. I walked around to the passenger door and got in.

"*Shit!--*" I cried out, suddenly noticing that in the back, pacing the rear seats behind a strong mesh screen, was a large Siberian wolf. The officer laughed loudly.

"Take no notice of the pup, ma'am! Officer Next, I'd like you to meet Mr. Meakle. Mr. Meakle, this is Officer Next."

He was talking about the wolf. I stared at the wolf, which stared back at me with an intensity that I found disconcerting. The officer laughed like a drain and pulled away with a lurch and a squeal of tires. I had forgotten just how weird Swindon could be.

As we drove off, the Will-Speak machine came to an end, reciting the last part of its soliloquy to itself:

*. . . Shine out, fair sun, till I have bought a glass, that I might see my shadow, as I pass.*

There was a clicking and whirring and then the mannequin stopped abruptly, lifeless again until the next coin.

"Beautiful day," I commented once we were under way.

"Every day is a beautiful day, Miss Next. The name's Stoker--"

He pulled out onto the Stratton bypass.

"--SpecOps-17: Vampire and Werewolf Disposal Operations. Suckers and biters, they call us. My friends call me Spike. You," he added with a broad grin, "can call me Spike."

By way of explanation he tapped a mallet and stake that were clipped to the mesh partition.

"What do they call you, Miss Next?"

"Thursday."

"Pleased to meet you, Thursday."

He proffered a huge hand that I shook gratefully. I liked him immediately. He leaned against the door pillar to get the best out of the cooling breeze and tapped a beat out on the steering wheel. A recent scratch on his neck oozed a small amount of blood.

"You're bleeding," I observed.

Spike wiped it away with his hand.

"It's nothing. He gave me a bit of a struggle!--"

I looked in the back seat again. The wolf was sitting down, scratching its ear with a hind leg.

"--but I'm immunized against lycanthropy. Mr. Meakle just won't take his medication. Will you, Mr. Meakle?"

The wolf pricked up its ears as the last vestige of the human within him remembered his name. He started to pant in the heat. Spike went on:

"His neighbors called. All the cats in the neighborhood had gone missing; I found him rummaging in the bins behind SmileyBurger. He'll be in for treatment, morph back and be on the streets again by Friday. He has rights, they tell me. What's your posting?"

"I'm . . . ah . . . joining SpecOps-27."

Spike laughed loudly again.

"A LiteraTec!? Always nice to meet someone as underfunded as I am. Some good faces in that office. Your chief is Victor Analogy. Don't be fooled by the gray hairs--he's as sharp as a knife. The others are all A-one Ops. A bit shiny-arsed and a mite too smart for me, but there you go. Where am I taking you?"

"The Finis Hotel."

"First time in Swindon?"

"Sadly, no," I replied. "It's my hometown. I was in the regular force here until '75. You?"

"Welsh Border guard for ten years. I got into some darkness at Oswestry in '79 and discovered I had a talent for this kind of shit. I trannied here from Oxford when the two depots merged. You're looking at the only Staker south of Leeds. I run my own office but it's mighty lonesome. If you know anyone handy with a mallet?--"

"I'm afraid I don't," I replied, wondering why anyone would consciously wish to fight the supreme powers of darkness for a basic SpecOps salary, "but if I come across anyone, I'll let you know. What happened to Chesney? He ran the department when I was here last."

A cloud crossed Spike's usually bright features and he sighed deeply.

"He was a good friend but he fell into shadows. Became a servant of the dark one. I had to hunt him down myself. The spike 'n' decap was the easy part. The tricky bit was having to tell his wife--she wasn't exactly overjoyed."

"I guess I'd be a bit pissed off too."

"Anyway," continued Spike, cheering up almost immediately, "you don't have to tell me shit, but what is a good-looking SpecOps doing joining the Swindon Litera Tecs?"

"I had a spot of bother in London."

"Ah," replied Spike knowingly.

"I'm also looking for someone."

"Who?"

I looked over at him and made an instant judgment call. If I could trust anyone, I could trust Spike.

"Hades."

"Acheron? Flatline, sister. The man's toast. Crashed and burned at J-twelve on the four."

"So we're led to believe. If you hear anything?--"

"No problem, Thursday."

"And we can keep this between ourselves?"

He smiled.

"After staking, secrets is what I do best."

"Hang on--"

I had caught sight of a brightly colored sports car in a second-hand car lot on the other side of the road. Spike slowed down.

"What's up?"

"I . . . er . . . need a car. Can you drop me over there?"

Spike executed an illegal U-turn, causing the following car to brake violently and slew across the road. The driver started to hurl abuse until he saw that it was a SpecOps black and white, then wisely kept quiet and drove on. I retrieved my bag.

"Thanks for the lift. I'll see you about."

"Not if I see you first!" said Spike. "I'll see what I can dig up on your missing friend."

"I'd appreciate it. Thanks."

"Good-bye."

"So long."

"Cheerio," said a timid-sounding voice from the back. We both turned and looked into the rear of the car. Mr. Meakle had changed back. A thin, rather pathetic-looking man was sitting in the back seat, completely naked and very muddy. His hands were clasped modestly over his genitals.

"Mr. Meakle! Welcome back!" said Spike, grinning broadly as he added in a scolding tone: "You didn't take your tablets, did you?"

Mr. Meakle shook his head miserably.

I thanked Spike again. As he drove off I could see Mr. Meakle waving to me a bit stupidly through the rear window. Spike did another U-turn, causing a second car to brake hard, and was gone.

I stared at the sports car on the front row of the lot under a banner marked BARGAIN. There could be no mistake. The car was definitely the one that had appeared before me in my hospital room. *And I had been driving it.* It was me who had told me to come to Swindon. It was me who had told me that Acheron wasn't dead. If I hadn't come to Swindon then I wouldn't have seen the car and wouldn't have been able to buy it. It didn't make a great deal of sense, but what little I did know was that I had to have it.

"Can I help you, madam?" asked an oily salesman who had appeared almost from nowhere, rubbing his hands nervously and sweating profusely in the heat.

"This car. How long have you had it?"

"The 356 Speedster? About six months."

"Has it ever been up to London in that time?"

"London?" repeated the salesman, slightly puzzled. "Not at all. Why?"

"No reason. I'll take it."

The salesman looked slightly shocked.

"Are you sure? Wouldn't you like something a little more practical? I have a good selection of Buicks which have just come in. Ex-Goliath but with low mileage, you know--"

"This one," I said firmly.

The salesman smiled uneasily. The car was obviously at a giveaway price and they didn't stand to make a bean on it. He muttered something feeble and hurried off to get the keys.

I sat inside. The interior was spartan in the extreme. I had never thought myself very interested in cars, but this one was different. It was outrageously conspicuous with curious paintwork in red, blue and green, but I liked it immediately. The salesman returned with the keys and it started on the second turn. He did the necessary paperwork and half an hour later I drove out of the lot into the road. The car accelerated rapidly with a rasping note from the tailpipe. Within a couple of hundred yards the two of us were inseparable.

## 9.

### The Next Family

. . . I was born on a Thursday, hence the name. My brother was born on a Monday and they called him Anton--go figure. My mother was called Wednesday but was born on a Sunday--I don't know why--and my father had no name at all--his identity and existence had been scrubbed by the ChronoGuard after he went rogue. To all intents and purposes he didn't exist at all. It didn't matter. He was always Dad to me . . .

THURSDAY NEXT

--*A Life in SpecOps*

I TOOK my new car for a drive in the countryside with the top down; the rushing air was a cool respite from the summer heat. The familiar landscape had not changed much; it was still as beautiful as I remembered. Swindon, on the other hand, had changed a great deal. The town had spread outward and up. Light industry went outward, financial glassy towers in the center went up. The residential area had expanded accordingly; the countryside was just that much farther from the center of town.

It was evening when I pulled up in front of a plain semidetached house in a street that contained forty or fifty just like it. I flipped up the hood and locked the car. This was where I had grown up; my bedroom was the window above the front door. The house had aged. The painted window frames had faded and the pebbledash facing seemed to be coming away from the wall in several areas. I pushed open the front gate with some difficulty as there was a good deal of resistance behind it, and then closed it again with a similar amount of heaving and sweating-- a task made more difficult by the assortment of dodos who had gathered eagerly around to see who it was and then *plocked* excitedly when they realized it was someone vaguely familiar.

"Hello, Mordacai!" I said to the oldest, who dipped and bobbed in greeting. They all wanted to be made a fuss of after that, so I stayed awhile and tickled them under their chins as they searched my pockets inquisitively for any sign of marshmallows, something that dodos find particularly irresistible.

My mother opened the door to see what the fuss was about and ran up the path to meet me. The dodos wisely scattered, as my mother can be dangerous at anything more than a fast walk. She gave me a long hug. I returned it gratefully.

"Thursday!--" she said, her eyes glistening. "Why didn't you tell us

you were coming?"

"It was a surprise, Mum. I've got a posting in town."

She had visited me in hospital several times and bored me in a delightfully distracting manner with all the minutiae of Margot Vishler's hysterectomy and the Women's Federation gossip.

"How's the arm?"

"It can be a bit stiff sometimes and when I sleep on it, it goes completely numb. Garden's looking nice. Can I come in?"

My mother apologized and ushered me through the door, taking my jacket and hanging it up in the cloakroom. She looked awkwardly at the automatic in my shoulder holster so I stuffed it in my case. The house, I soon noticed, was *exactly* the same: the same mess, the same furniture, the same smell. I paused to look around, to take it all in and bathe in the security of fond memories. The last time I had been truly happy was in Swindon, and this house had been the hub of my life for twenty years. A creeping doubt entered my mind about the wisdom of leaving the town in the first place.

We walked through to the lounge, still poorly decorated in browns and greens and looking like a museum of velour. The photo of my passing-out parade at the police training college was on the mantelpiece, along with another of Anton and myself in military fatigues smiling under the harsh sun of the Crimean summer. Sitting on the sofa were an aged couple who were busy watching TV.

"Polly!--Mycroft!--Look who it is!"

My aunt reacted favorably by rising to meet me, but Mycroft was more interested in watching *Name That Fruit!* on the television. He laughed a silly snorting laugh at a poor joke and waved a greeting in my direction without looking up.

"Hello, Thursday, *darling*," said my aunt. "Careful, I'm all made up."

We pointed cheeks at each other and made *mmuuah* noises. My aunt smelled strongly of lavender and had so much makeup on that even good Queen Bess would have been shocked.

"You well, Aunty?"

"Couldn't be better." She kicked her husband painfully on the ankle. "Mycroft, it's your niece."

"Hello, pet," he said without looking up, rubbing his foot. Polly lowered her voice.

"It's such a worry. All he does is watch TV and tinker in his workshop. Sometimes I think there's no one at home at all."

She glared hard at the back of his head before returning her attention to me.

"Staying for long?"

"She's been posted here," put in my mother.

"Have you lost weight?"

"I work out."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No," I replied. They would ask me about Landen next.

"Have you called Landen?"

"No, I haven't. And I don't want you to either."

"*Such* a nice lad. *The Toad* did a fantastic review of his last book: *Once Were Scoundrels*. Have you read it?"

I ignored her.

"Any news from Father?--" I asked.

"He didn't like the mauve paint in the bedroom," said my mother. "I can't think why you suggested it!"

Aunt Polly beckoned me closer and hissed unsubtly and very loudly in my ear:

"You'll have to excuse your mother; she thinks your dad is mixed up with *another woman*!"

Mother excused herself on a lame pretext and hurriedly left the room.

I frowned.

"What kind of woman?"

"Someone he met at work--Lady Emma someone-or-other."

I remembered the last conversation with Dad; the stuff about Nelson and the French revisionists.

"Emma *Hamilton*?"

My mother popped her head around the door from the kitchen.

"You know her?" she asked in an aggrieved tone.

"Not personally. I think she died in the mid-nineteenth century."

My mother narrowed her eyes.

"That old ruse."

She steeled herself and managed a bright smile.

"Will you stay for supper?"

I agreed, and she went to find a chicken that she could boil all the taste out of, her anger at Dad for the moment forgotten. Mycroft, the gameshow ended, shuffled into the kitchen wearing a gray zip-up cardigan and holding a copy of *New Splicer* magazine.

"What's for dinner?" he asked, getting in the way. Aunt Polly looked at him as you might a spoiled child.

"Mycroft, instead of wandering around wasting your time, why don't you waste Thursday's and show her what you've been up to in your workshop?"

Mycroft looked at us both with a vacant expression. He shrugged and beckoned me toward the back door, changing his slippers for a pair of gumboots and his cardigan for a truly dreadful plaid jacket.

"C'mon then, m'girl," he muttered, shooing the dodos from around the back door where they had been mustering in hope of a snack, and

strode toward his workshop.

"You might repair that garden gate, Uncle--it's worse than ever!"

"Not at all," he replied with a wink. "Every time someone goes in or out they generate enough power to run the telly for an hour. I haven't seen you about recently. Have you been away?"

"Well, yes; ten years."

He looked over his spectacles at me with some surprise.

"Really?"

"Yes. Is Owens still with you?"

Owens was Mycroft's assistant. He was an old boy who had been with Rutherford when he split the atom; Mycroft and he had been at school together.

"A bit tragic, Thursday. We were developing a machine that used egg white, heat and sugar to synthesize methanol when a power surge caused an implosion. Owens was meringued. By the time we chipped him out the poor chap had expired. Polly helps me now."

We had arrived at his workshop. A log with an ax stuck in it was all that was keeping the door shut. Mycroft fumbled for the switch and the striplights flickered on, filling the workshop with a harsh fluorescent glow. The laboratory looked similar to the last time I had seen it in terms of untidiness and the general bric-a-brac, but the contraptions were different. I had learned from my mother's many letters that Mycroft had invented a method for sending pizzas by fax and a 2B pencil with a built-in spell-checker, but what he was currently working on, I had no idea.

"Did the memory erasure device work, Uncle?"

"The what?"

"The memory erasure device. You were testing it when I last saw you."

"Don't know what you're talking about, dear girl. What do you make of this?"

A large white Rolls-Royce was sitting in the center of the room. I walked over to the vehicle as Mycroft tapped a fluorescent tube to stop it flickering.

"New car, Uncle?"

"No, no," said Mycroft hurriedly. "I don't drive. A friend of mine who hires these out was lamenting about the cost of keeping two, one black for funerals and the other white for weddings--so I came up with this."

He reached in and turned a large knob on the dashboard. There was a low hum and the car turned slowly off-white, gray, dark gray and then finally to black.

"That's very impressive, Uncle."

"Do you think so? It uses liquid crystal technology. But I took the



idea one step farther. Watch."

He turned the dial several more notches to the right and the car changed to blue, then mauve, and finally green with yellow dots.

"One-color cars a thing of the past! But that's not all. If I switch on the car's Pigmentizer like so, the car should . . . yes, yes, look at that!"

I watched with growing astonishment as the car started to fade in front of my eyes; the liquid crystal coating was emulating the background grays and browns of Mycroft's workshop. Within a few seconds the car had blended itself perfectly into the background. I thought of the fun you could have with traffic wardens.

"I call it the ChameleoCar; quite fun, don't you think?"

"Very."

I put out my hand and touched the warm surface of the camouflaged Rolls-Royce. I was going to ask Mycroft if I could have the cloaking device fitted to my Speedster but I was too late; enthused by my interest he had trotted off to a large rolltop bureau and was beckoning me over excitedly.

"Translating carbon paper," he announced breathlessly, pointing to several piles of brightly colored metallic film. "I call it Rosettionery. Allow me to demonstrate. We'll start with a plain piece of paper, then put in a Spanish carbon, a second slip of paper--must get them the right way up!--then a Polish carbon, more paper, German and another sheet and finally French and the last sheet . . . *there*."

He shuffled the bundle and laid it on the desk as I pulled up a chair.

"Write something on the first sheet. Anything you want."

"Anything?"

Mycroft nodded so I wrote: *Have you seen my dodo?*

"Now what?"

Mycroft looked triumphant.

"Have a look, dear girl."

I lifted off the top carbon and there, written in my own handwriting, were the words: *?Ha visto mi dodo?*

"But that's amazing!"

"Thank you," replied my Uncle. "Have a look at the next!"

I did. Beneath the Polish carbon was written: *Gdzie jest moje dodo?*

"I'm working on hieroglyphics and demotic," Mycroft explained as I peeled off the German translation to read: *Haben Sie mein Dodo gesehen?* "The Mayan Codex version was trickier but I can't manage Esperanto at all. Can't think why."

"This will have *dozens* of applications!" I exclaimed as I pulled off the last sheet to read, slightly disappointingly: *Mon aardvark n'a pas de nez.*

"Wait a moment, Uncle. *My aardvark has no nose?*"

Mycroft looked over my shoulder and grunted.

"You probably weren't pressing hard enough. You're police, aren't you?"

"SpecOps, really."

"Then this *might* interest you," he announced, leading me off past more wondrous gadgets, the use of which I could only guess at. "I'm demonstrating this particular machine to the police technical advancement committee on Wednesday."

He stopped next to a device that had a huge horn on it like an old gramophone. He cleared his throat.

"I call it my Olfactograph. It's very simple. Since any bloodhound worth its salt will tell you that each person's smell is unique like a thumbprint, then it follows that a machine that can recognize a felon's individual smell must be of use where other forms of identification fail. A thief may wear gloves and a mask, but he can't hide his scent."

He pointed at the horn.

"The odors are sucked up here and split into their individual parts using an Olfactroscope of my own invention. The component parts are then analyzed to give a 'pongprint' of the criminal. It can separate out ten different people's odors in a single room and isolate the newest or the oldest. It can detect burned toast up to six months after the event and differentiate between thirty different brands of cigar."

"Could be handy," I said, slightly doubtfully. "What's this over here?"

I was pointing to what looked like a trilby hat made from brass and covered in wires and lights.

"Oh yes," said my uncle, "*this* I think you will like."

He placed the brass hat on my head and flicked a large switch. There was a humming noise.

"Is something meant to happen?" I asked.

"Close your eyes and breathe deeply. Try to empty your mind of any thoughts."

I closed my eyes and waited patiently.

"Is it working?" asked Mycroft.

"No," I replied, then added: "Wait!" as a stickleback swam past. "I can see a fish. Here, in front of my eyes. Wait, there's another!"

And so there was. Pretty soon I was staring at a whole host of brightly colored fish all swimming in front of my closed eyes. They were on about a five-second loop; every now and then they jumped back to the starting place and repeated their action.

"Remarkable!"

"Stay relaxed or it will go," said Mycroft in a soothing voice. "Try this one."

There was a blur of movement and the scene shifted to an inky-black starfield; it seemed as though I were traveling through space.

"Or how about this?" asked Mycroft, changing the scene to a parade

of flying toasters. I opened my eyes and the image evaporated. Mycroft was looking at me earnestly.

"Any good?" he asked.

I nodded.

"I call it a Retinal Screen-Saver. Very useful for boring jobs; instead of gazing absently out of the window you can transform your surroundings to any number of soothing images. As soon as the phone goes or your boss walks in you blink and *bingo!*-- you're back in the real world again."

I handed back the hat.

"Should sell well at SmileyBurger. When do you hope to market it?"

"It's not really ready yet; there are a few problems I haven't quite fixed."

"Such as what?" I asked, slightly suspiciously.

"Close your eyes and you'll see."

I did as he asked and a fish swam by. I blinked again and could see a toaster. Clearly, this needed some work.

"Don't worry," he assured me. "They will have gone in a few hours."

"I preferred the Olfactroscope."

"You haven't seen anything yet!" said Mycroft, skipping nimbly up to a large work desk covered by tools and bits of machinery. "This device is probably my most amazing discovery ever. It is the culmination of thirty years' work and incorporates biotechnology at the very cutting edge of science. When you find out what this is, I promise you, you'll flip!"

He pulled a tea towel off a goldfish bowl with a flourish and showed me what appeared to be a large quantity of fruitfly larvae.

"Maggots?"

Mycroft smiled.

"Not maggots, Thursday, *bookworms!*"

He said the word with such a bold and proud flourish that I thought I must have missed something.

"Is that good?"

"It's *very* good, Thursday. These worms might *look* like a tempting snack for Mr. Trout, but each one of these little fellows has enough new genetic sequencing to make the code embedded in your pet dodo look like a note to the milkman!"

"Hold on a sec, Uncle," I said. "Didn't you have your Splicense revoked after that incident with the prawns?"

"A small misunderstanding," he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Those fools at SpecOps-13 have no idea of the value of my work."

"Which is?--" I asked, ever curious.

"Ever smaller methods of storing information. I collected all the

finest dictionaries, thesauri and lexicons, as well as grammatical, morphological and etymological studies of the English language, and encoded them all within the DNA of the worm's small body. I call them HyperBookworms. I think you'll agree that it's a remarkable achievement."

"I agree. But how would you access this information?"

Mycroft's face fell.

"As I said, a remarkable achievement with one small drawback. However, events ran ahead of themselves; some of my worms escaped and bred with others that had been encoded with a complete set of encyclopedic, historical and biographical reference manuals; the result was a new strain I named HyperBookwormDoublePlusGood. These chaps are the *real* stars of the show."

He pulled a sheet of paper from a drawer, tore off a corner and wrote the word "remarkable" on the small scrap.

"This is just to give you a *taste* of what these creatures can do."

So saying, he dropped the piece of paper into the goldfish bowl. The worms wasted no time and quickly surrounded the small scrap. But instead of eating it they merely conglomerated around it, squirmed excitedly and explored the interloper with apparent great interest.

"I had a wormery back in London, Uncle, and they didn't like paper either--"

"Shh!" murmured my uncle, and beckoned me closer to the worms.

*Amazing!*

"What is?" I asked, somewhat perplexed; but as soon as I looked at Mycroft's smiling face I realized it wasn't him speaking.

*Astonishing!* said the voice again in a low murmur. *Incredible! Astounding! Stunning!*

I frowned and looked at the worms, which had gathered themselves into a small ball around the scrap of paper and were pulsating gently.

*Wonderful!* mumbled the bookworms. *Extraordinary! Fantastic!*

"What do you think?" asked Mycroft.

"Thesaurean maggots--Uncle, you never cease to amaze me!"

But Mycroft was suddenly a lot more serious.

"It's more than just a bio-thesaurus, Thursday. These little chaps can do things that you will scarce believe."

He opened a cupboard and pulled out a large leather book with pp embossed on the spine in gold letters. The casing was richly decorated and featured heavy brass securing straps. On the front were several dials and knobs, valves and knife switches. It certainly *looked* impressive, but not all Mycroft's devices had a usefulness mutually compatible with their looks. In the early seventies he had developed an extraordinarily beautiful machine that did nothing more exciting than predict with staggering accuracy the number of pips in an

unopened orange.

"What is it?" I asked.

"This," began Mycroft, smiling all over and puffing out his chest with pride, "is a--"

But he never got to finish. At that precise moment Polly announced "Supper!" from the door and Mycroft quickly ran out, muttering something about how he hoped it was snorkers and telling me to switch off the lights on my way out. I was left alone in his empty workshop. Truly, Mycroft had surpassed himself.

*Dazzling!* agreed the bookworms.

Supper was a friendly affair. We all had a lot of catching up to do, and my mother had a great deal to tell me about the Women's Federation.

"We raised almost seven thousand pounds last year for ChronoGuard orphans," she said.

"That's very good," I replied. "SpecOps is always grateful for the contributions, although to be fair there are other divisions worse off than the ChronoGuard."

"Well, I know," replied my mother, "but it's all so secret. What do all of them do?"

"Believe me, I have no more idea than you. Can you pass the fish?"

"There isn't any fish," observed my aunt. "You haven't been using your niece as a guinea pig have you, Crofty?"

My uncle pretended not to hear; I blinked and the fish vanished.

"The only other one I know under SO-20 is SO-6," added Polly. "That was National Security. We only know *that* because they all looked after Mycroft so well."

She nudged him in the ribs but he didn't notice; he was busy figuring out a recipe for unscrambled eggs on a napkin.

"I don't suppose a week went by in the sixties when he wasn't being kidnapped by one foreign power or another," she sighed wistfully, thinking of the exciting old days with a whiff of nostalgia.

"Some things have to be kept secret for operational purposes," I recited parrot fashion. "Secrecy is our biggest weapon."

"I read in *The Mole* that SpecOps is riddled with secret societies. The Wombats in particular," murmured Mycroft, placing his completed equation in his jacket pocket. "Is this true?"

I shrugged.

"No more than in any other walk of life, I suppose. I've not noticed it myself, but then as a woman I wouldn't be approached by the Wombats anyway."

"Seems a bit unfair to me," said Polly in a tut-tutting voice. "I'm fully in support of secret societies--the more the better-- but I think they should be open to everyone, men *and* women."

"Men are welcome to it," I replied. "It means that at least half the population won't have to make complete idiots of themselves. It surprises me that you haven't been approached to join, Uncle."

Mycroft grunted.

"I used to be one at Oxford many years ago. Waste of time. It was all a bit silly; the pouch used to chafe something awful and all that gnawing played hell with my overbite."

There was a pause.

"Major Phelps is in town," I said, changing the subject. "I met him on the airship. He's a colonel now but is still blasting the same old line."

By an unwritten rule, no one ever spoke of the Crimea or Anton in the house. There was an icy hush.

"Really?" replied my mother with seemingly no emotion.

"Joffy has a parish up at Wanborough these days," announced Polly, hoping to change the subject. "He's opened the first GSD church in Wessex. I spoke to him last week; he says that it has been quite popular."

Joffy was my other brother. He had taken to the faith at an early age and tried all sorts of religions before settling for the GSD.

"GSD?" murmured Mycroft. "What in heaven's name is that?"

"Global Standard Deity," answered Polly. "It's a mixture of all the religions. I think it's meant to stop religious wars."

Mycroft grunted again.

"Religion isn't the cause of wars, it's the excuse. What's the melting point of beryllium?"

"180.57 degrees centigrade," murmured Polly without even thinking. "I think Joffy is doing a grand job. You should call him, Thursday."

"Maybe."

Joffy and I had never been close. He had called me Doofus and smacked me on the back of my head every day for fifteen years. I had to break his nose to make him stop.

"If you are calling people why don't you call--"

"Mother!"

"He's quite successful now, I understand, Thursday. It might be good for you to see him again."

"Landen and I are finished, Mum. Besides, I have a boyfriend."

This, to my mother, was *extremely* good news. It had been of considerable anguish to her that I wasn't spending more time with swollen ankles, hemorrhoids and a bad back, popping out grandchildren and naming them after obscure relatives. Joffy wasn't the sort of person who had children, which kind of left it up to me. In all honesty I wasn't against the idea of kids, it was just that I wasn't

going to have them on my own. And Landen had been the last man to have remotely interested me as a possible life partner.

"A boyfriend? What's his name?"

I said the first name that popped into my head.

"Snood. *Filbert* Snood."

"Nice name." My mother smiled.

"Daft name," grumbled Mycroft. "Like Landen Parke-Laine, come to that. Can I get down? It's time for *Jack Spratt's Casebook*."

Polly and Mycroft both got up and left us. Landen's name didn't come up again and neither did Anton's. Mum offered me my old room back but I quickly declined. We had argued ferociously when I had lived at home. Besides, I was almost thirty-six. I finished my coffee and walked with my mother to the front door.

"Let me know if you change your mind, darling," she said. "Your room is the same as it always was."

If that were true the dreadful posters of my late teenage crushes would still be up on the wall. It was a thought too hideous to contemplate.

## 10.

### The Finis Hotel, Swindon

Miltons were, on the whole, the most enthusiastic poet followers. A flick through the London telephone directory would yield about four thousand John Miltons, two thousand William Blakes, a thousand or so Samuel Coleridges, five hundred Percy Shelleys, the same of Wordsworth and Keats, and a handful of Drydens. Such mass name-changing could have problems in law enforcement. Following an incident in a pub where the assailant, victim, witness, landlord, arresting officer and judge had all been called Alfred Tennyson, a law had been passed compelling each namesake to carry a registration number tattooed behind the ear. It hadn't been well received--few really practical law-enforcement measures ever are.

MILLON DE FLOSS

--A Short History of the Special Operations Network

I PULLED into a parking place in front of the large floodlit building and locked the car. The hotel seemed to be quite busy, and as soon as I walked into the lobby I could see why. At least two dozen men and women were milling about dressed in large white baggy shirts and breeches. My heart sank. A large notice near reception welcomed all comers to the 112th Annual John Milton Convention. I took a deep breath and fought my way to the reception desk. A middle-aged receptionist with oversize earrings gave me her best welcoming smile.

"Good evening, madam, welcome to the Finis, the last word in comfort and style. We are a four-star hotel with many modern features and services. Our sincere wish is to make *your* stay a happy one!"

She recited it like a mantra. I could see her working at SmileyBurger just as easily.

"The name's Next. I have a reservation."

The receptionist nodded and flicked through the reservation cards.

"Let's see. Milton, Milton, Milton, Milton, Milton, Next, Milton, Milton, Milton, Milton, Milton, Milton. No, sorry. It doesn't look like we have a booking for you."

"Could you check again?"

She looked again and found it.

"Here it is. Someone had put it with the Miltons by accident. I'll need an imprint of a major credit card. We take: Babbage, Goliath, Newton, Pascal, Breakfast Club and Jam Roly-Poly."

"Jam Roly-Poly?"

"Sorry," she said sheepishly, "wrong list. That's the choice of puddings tonight." She smiled again as I passed over my Babbage



charge card.

"You're in room 8128," she said, handing me my key attached to a key ring so large I could barely lift it. "All our rooms are fully air-conditioned and are equipped with minibar and tea-making equipment. Did you park your car in our spacious three-hundred-place self-draining car park?"

I hid a smile.

"Thank you, I did. Do you have any pet facilities?"

"Of course. All Finis hotels have full kennel facilities. What sort of pet?"

"A dodo."

"How sweet! My cousin Arnold had a great auk once called Beany--he was Version 1.4 so didn't live long. I understand they're a lot better these days. I'll reserve your little friend a place. Enjoy your stay. I hope you have an interest in seventeenth-century lyrical poets."

"Only professionally."

"Lecturer?"

"Litera Tec."

"Ah."

The receptionist leaned closer and lowered her voice.

"To tell you the truth, Miss Next, I *hate* Milton. His early stuff is okay, I suppose, but he disappeared up his own arse after Charlie got his head lopped off. Goes to show what too much republicanism does for you."

"Quite."

"I almost forgot. These are for you."

She produced a bunch of flowers from under the desk as if in a conjuring trick.

"From a Mr. Landen Parke-Laine--"

Blast. Rumbled.

"--and there are two gentlemen waiting in the Cheshire Cat for you."

"The Cheshire Cat?"

"It's our fully stocked and lively bar. Tended to by professional and helpful bar staff, it is a warm and welcoming area in which to relax."

"Who are they?"

"The bar staff?"

"No, the two gentlemen."

"They didn't give any names."

"Thank you, Miss?--"

"Barrett-Browning," said the receptionist, "Liz Barrett-Browning."

"Well, Liz, keep the flowers. Make your boyfriend jealous. If Mr. Parke-Laine calls again, tell him I died of hemorrhagic fever or something."

I pushed my way through the throng of Miltons and onto the Cheshire Cat. It was easy to find. Above the door was a large red neon cat on a green neon tree. Every couple of minutes the red neon flickered and went out, leaving the cat's grin on its own in the tree. The sound of a jazz band reached my ears from the bar as I walked across the lobby, and a smile crossed my lips as I heard the unmistakable piano of Holroyd Wilson. He was a Swindon man, born and bred. He could have played any bar in Europe with one phone call, but he had chosen to remain in Swindon. The bar was busy but not packed, the clientele mostly Miltons, who were sitting around drinking and joking, lamenting the Restoration and referring to each other as John.

I went up to the bar. It was happy hour in the Cheshire Cat, any drink for 52.5 p.

"Good evening," said the barman. "Why is a raven like a writing desk?"

"Because Poe wrote on both?"

"Very good." He laughed. "What's it to be?"

"A half of Vorpals special, please. The name's Next. Anyone waiting for me?"

The barman, who was dressed like a hatter, indicated a booth on the other side of the room in which two men were sitting, partially obscured by shadows. I took my drink and walked over. The room was too full for anyone to start any trouble. As I drew closer I could see the two men more clearly.

The elder of the two was a gray-haired gentleman in his mid-seventies. He had large mutton-chop sideburns and was dressed in a neat tweed suit with a silk bow tie. His hands were holding a pair of brown gloves on top of his walking stick and I could see a deerstalker hat on the seat next to him. His face had a ruddy appearance, and as I approached he threw back his head and laughed like a seal at something the younger man had said.

The man opposite him was aged about thirty. He sat on the front of his seat in a slightly nervous manner. He sipped at a tonic water and wore a pinstripe suit that was expensive but had seen better days. I knew I had seen him before somewhere but couldn't think where.

"You gentlemen looking for me?"

They both got up together. The elder of the two spoke first.

"Miss Next? Delighted to make your acquaintance. The name's Analogy. Victor Analogy. Head of Swindon LiteraTecs. We spoke on the phone."

He offered his hand and I shook it.

"Pleased to meet you, sir."

"This is Operative Bowden Cable. You'll be working together."

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, madam," said Bowden quite grandly, slightly awkwardly and very stiffly.

"Have we met before?" I asked, shaking his outstretched hand.

"No," said Bowden firmly. "I would have remembered."

Victor offered me a seat next to Bowden, who shuffled up making polite noises. I took a sip of my drink. It tasted like old horse blankets soaked in urine. I coughed explosively. Bowden offered me his handkerchief.

"Vorpall's special?" said Victor, raising an eyebrow. "Brave girl."

"Th-thank you."

"Welcome to Swindon," continued Victor. "First of all I'd like to say how sorry we were to hear about your little incident. By all accounts Hades was a monster. I'm not sorry he died. I hope you are quite recovered?"

"I am, but others were not so fortunate."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but you are very welcome here. No one of your caliber has ever bothered to join us in this backwater before."

I looked at Analogy and was slightly puzzled.

"I'm not sure I understand what you're driving at."

"What I mean--not to put too fine a point on it--is all of us in the office are more academics than typical SpecOp agents. Your post was held by Jim Crometty. He was shot dead in the old town during a bookbuy that went wrong. He was Bowden's partner. Jim was a very special friend to us all; he had a wife, three kids. I want . . . no, I want *very badly* the person who took Crometty from us."

I stared at their earnest faces with some confusion until the penny dropped. They thought I was a full and pukka SO-5 operative on a rest-and-recuperation assignment. It wasn't unusual. Back at SO-27 we used to get worn-out characters from SO-9 and SO-7 all the time. Without exception they had all been mad as pants.

"You've read my file?" I asked slowly.

"They wouldn't release it," replied Analogy. "It's not often we get an operative moving to our little band from the dizzy heights of SpecOps-5. We needed a replacement with good field experience but also someone who can . . . well, how shall I put it?--"

Analogy paused, apparently at a loss for words. Bowden answered for him.

"We need someone who isn't frightened to use *extreme force* if deemed necessary."

I looked at them both, wondering whether it would be better to come clean; after all, the only thing I had shot recently was my own car and a seemingly bullet-proof master criminal. I was officially SO-27, not SO-5. But with the strong possibility of Acheron still being around, and revenge still high on my agenda, perhaps it would be

better to play along.

Analogy shuffled nervously.

"Crometty's murder is being looked after by Homicide, of course. Unofficially we can't do a great deal, but SpecOps has always prided itself on a certain *independence*. If we uncovered any evidence in the pursuit of other inquiries, it would not be frowned upon. Do you understand?"

"Sure. Do you have any idea who killed Crometty?"

"Someone said that they had something for him to see, to buy. A rare Dickens manuscript. He went to see it and . . . well, he wasn't armed, you know."

"Few LiteraTecs in Swindon even know how to use a firearm," added Bowden, "and training for many of them is out of the question. Literary detection and firearms don't really go hand in hand; pen mightier than the sword and so forth."

"Words are all very well," I replied coolly, suddenly enjoying the SO-5 woman-of-mystery stuff, "but a nine-millimeter really gets to the root of the problem."

They stared at me in silence for a second or two. Victor drew out a photograph from a buff envelope and placed it on the table in front of me.

"We'd like your opinion on this. It was taken yesterday."

I looked at the photo. I knew the face well enough.

"Jack Schitt."

"And what do you know about him?"

"Not much. He's head of Goliath's Internal Security Service. He wanted to know what Hades had planned to do with the *Chuzzlewit* manuscript."

"I'll let you into a secret. You're right that Schitt's Goliath but he's *not* Internal Security."

"What, then?"

"Advanced Weapons Division. Eight billion annual budget and it all goes through him."

"Eight billion?"

"And loose change. Rumor has it they even went over *that* budget to develop the plasma rifle. He's intelligent, ambitious and quite inflexible. He came here two weeks ago. He wouldn't be in Swindon at all unless there was something here that Goliath found of great interest; we think Crometty went to see the original manuscript of *Chuzzlewit* and if that is so--"

"--Schitt is here because I am," I announced suddenly. "He thought it suspicious that I should want an SO-27 job in Swindon of all places--no offense meant."

"None taken," replied Analogy. "But Schitt being here makes me

think that Hades is still about--or at the very least Goliath *think* so."

"I know," I replied. "Worrying, isn't it?"

Analogy and Cable looked at one another. They had made the points they wanted to make: I was welcome here, they were keen to avenge Crometty's death and they didn't like Jack Schitt. They wished me a pleasant evening, donned their hats and coats and were gone.

The jazz number came to an end. I joined in the applause as Holroyd got shakily to his feet and waved at the crowd before leaving. The bar thinned out rapidly once the music had finished, leaving me almost alone. I looked to my right, where two Miltons were busy making eyes at one another, and then at the bar, where several suited business reps were drinking as much as they could on their overnight allowance. I walked over to the piano and sat down. I struck a few chords, testing my arm at first, then becoming more adventurous as I played the lower half of a duet I remembered. I looked at the barman to order another drink but he was busy drying a glass. As the intro for the top part of the duet came around for the third time, a man's hand reached in and played the first note of the upper part exactly on time. I closed my eyes; I knew who it was instantly, but I wasn't going to look up. I could smell his aftershave and noticed the scar on his left hand. The hair on the back of my neck bristled slightly and I felt a flush rise within me. I instinctively moved to the left and let him sit down. His fingers drifted across the keys with mine, the two of us playing together almost flawlessly. The barman looked on approvingly, and even the suited salesmen stopped talking and looked around to see who was playing. Still I did not look up. As my hands grew more accustomed to that long-unplayed tune I grew confident and played faster. My unwatched partner kept up the tempo to match me.

We played like this for perhaps ten minutes, but I couldn't bring myself to look at him. I knew that if I did I would smile and I didn't want to do that. I wanted him to know I was still pissed off. *Then* he could charm me. When the piece finally came to an end I continued to stare ahead. The man next to me didn't move.

"Hello, Landen," I said finally.

"Hello, Thursday."

I played a couple of notes absently but still didn't look up.

"It's been a long time," I said.

"A *lot* of water under the bridge," he replied. "Ten years' worth."

His voice sounded the same. The warmth and sensitivity I had once known so well were still there. I looked up at him, caught his gaze and looked away quickly. I had felt my eyes moisten. I was embarrassed by my feelings and scratched my nose nervously. He had gone slightly gray but he wore his hair in much the same manner. There were slight

wrinkles around his eyes, but they might just as easily have been from laughing as from age. He was thirty when I walked out; I had been twenty-six. I wondered whether I had aged as well as he had. Was I too old to still hold a grudge? After all, getting into a strop with Landen wasn't going to bring Anton back. I felt an urge to ask him if it was too late to try again, but as I opened my mouth the world juddered to a halt. The D sharp I had just pressed kept on sounding and Landen stared at me, his eyes frozen in midblink. Dad's timing could not have been worse.

"Hello, Sweetpea!" he said, walking up to me out of the shadows. "Am I disturbing anything?"

"Most definitely--yes."

"I won't be long, then. What do you make of this?"

He handed me a yellow curved thing about the size of a large carrot.

"What is it?" I asked, smelling it cautiously.

"It's the fruit of a new plant designed completely from scratch seventy years from now. Look--"

He peeled the skin off and let me taste it.

"Good, eh? You can pick it well before ripe, transport it thousands of miles if necessary and it will keep fresh in its own hermetically sealed biodegradable packaging. Nutritious and tasty, too. It was sequenced by a brilliant engineer named Anna Bannon. We're a bit lost as to what to call it. Any ideas?"

"I'm sure you'll think of something. What are you going to do with it?"

"I thought I'd introduce it somewhere in the tenth millennium before the present one and see how it goes--food for mankind, that sort of thing. Well, time waits for no man, as we say. I'll let you get back to Landen."

The world flickered and started up again. Landen opened his eyes and stared at me.

"Banana," I said, suddenly realizing what it was that my father had shown me.

"Pardon?"

"Banana. They named it after the designer."

"Thursday, you're making no sense at all," said Landen with a bemused grin.

"My dad was just here."

"Ah. Is he still of all time?"

"Still the same. Listen, I'm sorry about what happened."

"Me too," replied Landen, then lapsed into silence. I wanted to touch his face but instead I said:

"I missed you."

It was the wrong thing to say and I cursed myself; too much, too soon. Landen shuffled uneasily.

"You should take aim more carefully. I missed you a lot too. The first year was the worst."

Landen paused for a moment. He played a few notes on the piano and then said:

"I have a life and I like it here. Sometimes I think that Thursday Next was just a character from one of my novels, someone I made up in the image of the woman I wanted to love. Now . . . well, I'm over it."

It wasn't *really* what I was hoping to hear, but after all that had happened I couldn't blame him.

"But you came to find me."

Landen smiled at me.

"You're in my town, Thurs. When a friend comes in from out of town, you look them up. Isn't that how it's supposed to work?"

"And you buy them flowers? Does Colonel Phelps get roses too?"

"No, he gets lilies. Old habits die hard."

"I see. You've been doing well for yourself."

"Thanks," he replied. "You never answered my letters."

"I never *read* your letters."

"Are you married?"

"I can't see that's any of your business."

"I'll take that as a no."

The conversation had taken a turn for the worse. It was time to bale out.

"Listen, I'm bushed, Landen. I have a very big day ahead of me."

I got up. Landen limped after me. He had lost a leg in the Crimea but he was well used to it by now. He caught up with me at the bar.

"Dinner one night?"

I turned to face him.

"Sure."

"Tuesday?"

"Why not?"

"Good," said Landen, rubbing his hands. "We could get the old unit back together--"

This wasn't what I had in mind.

"Hang on. Tuesday's not very good after all."

"Why not? It was fine three seconds ago. Has your dad been around again?"

"No, I just have a lot of things that I have to do and Pickwick needs kenneling and I have to pick him up at the station as airships make him nervous. You remember the time we took him up to Mull and he vomited all over the steward?"

I checked myself. I was starting to blabber like an idiot.

"And don't tell me," added Landen, "you have to wash your hair?"

"Very funny."

"What work are you doing in Swindon anyway?" asked Landen.

"I wash up at SmileyBurger."

"Sure you do. SpecOps?"

I nodded my head.

"I joined Swindon's Litera Tec unit."

"Permanently?" he asked. "I mean, you've come back to Swindon for good?"

"I don't know."

I placed my hand on his. I wanted to hug him and burst into tears and tell him I loved him and would *always* love him like some huge emotional dumb girlie, but time wasn't quite right, as my father would say. I decided to get on the question offensive instead so I asked:

"Are *you* married?"

"No."

"Never thought about it?"

"I thought about it a lot."

We both lapsed into silence. There was so much to say that neither of us could think of any way to start. Landen opened a second front:

"Want to see *Richard III*?"

"Is it still running?"

"Of course."

"I'm tempted but the fact remains I don't know when I will be free. Things are . . . volatile at present."

I could see he didn't believe me. I couldn't really tell him I was on the trail of a master criminal who could steal thoughts and project images at will; who was invisible on film and could murder and laugh as he did so. Landen sighed, dug out a calling card and placed it on the counter.

"Call me. Whenever you're free. Promise?"

"Promise."

He kissed me on the cheek, finished his drink, looked at me again and limped out of the bar. I was left looking at his calling card. I didn't pick it up. I didn't need to. The number was the one I remembered.

My room was exactly like all the other rooms in the hotel. The pictures were screwed to the walls and the drinks in the minibar had been opened, drunk, then resealed with water or cold tea by traveling reps too mean to pay for them. The room faced north; I could just see the airship field. A large forty-seater was moored on the mast, its silver flanks floodlit in the dark night. The small dirigible that had



brought me in had continued onto Salisbury; I briefly thought about catching it again when it called on its return the day after tomorrow. I turned on the television just in time to catch *Today in Parliament*. The Crimean debate had been raging all day and wasn't over yet. I emptied my pockets of loose change, took my automatic out of its shoulder holster and opened the bedside drawer. It was full. Apart from the Gideon's Bible there were the teachings of Buddha and an English copy of the Koran. There was also a GSD volume of prayer and a Wesleyan pamphlet, two amulets from the Society for Christian Awareness, the thoughts of St. Zvlkx and the now mandatory *Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. I removed all the books, stuffed them in the cupboard and placed my automatic in the drawer instead. I unzipped my case and started to organize my room. I hadn't rented out my apartment in London; I didn't know if I was staying here or not. Oddly, the town had started to feel very comfortable and I wasn't sure whether I liked that or not. I laid everything on my bed and then put it all carefully away. I placed a few books on the desk and the life-saving copy of *Jane Eyre* onto the bedside table. I picked up Landen's photo and walked over to the bureau, thought for a moment and then placed it upside down in my knicker drawer. With the real thing around I had no need for an image. The TV droned on:

". . . despite intervention by the French and a Russian guarantee of safe habitation for English settlers, it looks as though the English government will not be resuming its place around the table at Budapest. With England still adamant about an offensive using the new so-called Stonk plasma rifle, peace will *not* be descending on the Black Sea peninsula . . ."

The anchorman shuffled some papers.

"Home news now, and violence flared again in Chichester as a group of neosurrealists gathered to celebrate the fourth anniversary of the legalization of surrealism. On the spot for Toad News Network is Henry Grubb. Henry, how are things down there?"

A shaky live picture came onto the screen, and I stopped for a moment to watch. Behind Grubb was a car that had been overturned and set on fire, and several officers were in riot gear. Henry Grubb, who was in training for the job of Crimean correspondent and secretly hoped that the war wouldn't end until he had had a chance to get out there, wore a navy blue flak jacket and spoke with the urgent, halting speech of a correspondent in a war zone.

"Things are a bit hot down here, Brian. I'm a hundred yards from the riot zone and I can see several cars overturned and on fire. The police have been trying to keep the factions apart all day, but the sheer weight of numbers has been against them. This evening several

hundred Raphaelites surrounded the *N'est pas une pipe* public house where a hundred neosurrealists have barricaded themselves in. The demonstrators outside chanted Italian Renaissance slogans and then stones and missiles were thrown. The neosurrealists responded by charging the lines protected by large soft watches and seemed to be winning until the police moved in. Wait, I can just see a man arrested by the police. I'll try and get an interview."

I shook my head sadly and put some shoes in the bottom of the wardrobe. There was violence when surrealism was banned and there was violence as the same ban was lifted. Grubb continued his broadcast as he intercepted a policeman marching away a youth dressed in sixteenth-century garb with a faithful reproduction of the "Hand of God" from the Sistine chapel tattooed on his face.

"Excuse me, sir, how would you counter the criticism that you are an intolerant bunch with little respect for the value of change and experimentation in all aspects of art?"

The Renaissancite glanced at the camera with an angry scowl.

"People say we're just Renaissancites causing trouble, but I've seen Baroque kids, Raphaelites, Romantics and Mannerists here tonight. It's a massive show of classical artistic unity against these frivolous bastards who cower beneath the safety of the word 'progress.' It's not just--"

The police officer intervened and dragged him away. Grubb ducked a flying brick and then wound up his report.

"This is Henry Grubb, reporting for Toad News Network, live from Chichester."

I turned off the television with a remote that was chained to the bedside table. I sat on the bed and pulled out my hair tie, let my hair down and rubbed my scalp. I sniffed dubiously at my hair and decided against a shower. I had been harder than I intended with Landen. Even with our differences we still had more than enough in common to be good friends.

## 11.

### Polly Flashes Upon the Inward Eye

I think Wordsworth was as surprised to see me as I was him. It can't be usual to go to your favorite memory only to find someone already there, admiring the view ahead of you.

POLLY NEXT

--interviewed exclusively for *The Owl on Sunday*

As I was dealing with Landen in my own clumsy way, my uncle and aunt were hard at work in Mycroft's workshop. As I was to learn later, things seemed to be going quite well. To begin with, at any rate.

Mycroft was feeding his bookworms in the workshop when Polly entered; she had just completed some mathematical calculations of almost incomprehensible complexity for him.

"I have the answer you wanted, Crofty, my love," she said, sucking the end of a well-worn pencil.

"And that is?" asked Mycroft, busily pouring prepositions onto the bookworms, who devoured the abstract food greedily.

"Nine."

Mycroft mumbled something and jotted the figure down on a pad. He opened the large brass-reinforced book that I had not quite been introduced to the night before to reveal a cavity into which he placed a large-print copy of Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." To this he added the bookworms, who busily got to work. They slithered over the text, their small bodies and unfathomable collective id unconsciously examining every sentence, word, vowel sound and syllable. They probed deeply into the historical, biographical and geographical allusions, then they explored the inner meanings hidden within the meter and rhythm and juggled ingeniously with subtext, content and inflection. After that they made up a few verses of their own and converted the result into binary.

*Lakes! Daffodils! Solitude! Memory!* whispered the worms excitedly as Mycroft carefully closed the book and locked it. He connected up the heavy mains feed to the back of the book and switched the power switch to "on"; he then started work on the myriad of knobs and dials that covered the front of the heavy volume. Despite the Prose Portal being essentially a bio-mechanism, there were still many delicate procedures that had to be set before the device would work; and since the portal was of an absurd complexity, Mycroft was forced to write

up the precise sequence of start-up events and combinations in a small child's exercise book of which--ever wary of foreign spies--he held the only copy. He studied the small book for several moments before twisting dials, setting switches and gently increasing the power, all the while muttering to himself and Polly:

"Binametrics, spherics, numerics. I'm--"

"On?"

"Off!" replied Mycroft sadly. "No, wait . . . *There!*"

He smiled happily as the last of the warning lights extinguished. He took his wife's hand and squeezed it affectionately.

"Would you care to have the honor?" he asked. "The first human being to step inside a Wordsworth poem?"

Polly looked at him uneasily.

"Are you sure it's safe?"

"As safe as houses," he assured her. "I went into 'The Wreck of the *Hesperus*' an hour ago."

"Really? What was it like?"

"Wet--and I think I left my jacket behind."

"The one I gave you for Christmas?"

"No; the other one. The blue one with large checks."

"That's the one I *did* give you for Christmas," she scolded. "I wish you would be more careful. What was it you wanted me to do?"

"Just stand here. If all goes well, as soon as I press this large green button the worms will open a door to the daffodils that William Wordsworth knew and loved."

"And if all *doesn't* go well?" asked Polly slightly nervously. Owens' demise inside a giant meringue never failed to impinge on her thoughts whenever she guinea-pigged one of her husband's machines, but apart from some slight singeing while testing a one-man butane-powered pantomime horse, none of Mycroft's devices had ever harmed her at all.

"Hmm," said Mycroft thoughtfully, "it is *possible* although highly unlikely that I could start a chain reaction that will fuse matter and annihilate the known universe."

"Really?"

"No, not really at all. My little joke. Are you ready?"

Polly smiled.

"Ready."

Mycroft pressed the large green button and there was a low hum from the book. The streetlights flickered and dimmed outside as the machine drew a huge quantity of power to convert the bookworm's binametric information. As they both watched, a thin shaft of light appeared in the workshop, as though a door had been opened from a winter's day into summer. Dust glistened in the beam of light, which

gradually grew broader until it was large enough to enter.

"All you have to do is step through!" yelled Mycroft above the noise of the machine. "To open the door requires a lot of power; you have to hurry!"

The high voltage was making the air heavy; metallic objects close by were starting to dance and crackle with static.

Polly stepped closer to the door and smiled nervously at her husband. The shimmering expanse of white light rippled as she put her hand up to touch it. She took a deep breath and stepped through the portal. There was a bright flash and a burst of heavy electrical discharge; two small balls of highly charged gas plasma formed spontaneously near the machine and barreled out in two directions; Mycroft had to duck as one sailed past him and burst harmlessly on the Rolls-Royce; the other exploded on the Olfactograph and started a small fire. Just as quickly the light and sound died away, the doorway closed and the streetlights outside flickered up to full brightness again.

*Clouds! Jocund company! Sprightly dance!* chattered the worms contentedly as the needles flicked and rocked on the cover of the book, the two-minute countdown to the reopening of the portal already in progress. Mycroft smiled happily and patted his pockets for his pipe until he realized with dismay that it too was inside *Hesperus*, so instead he sat down on the prototype of a sarcasm early-warning device and waited. Everything, so far, was working *extremely* well.

On the other side of the Prose Portal, Polly stood on the grassy bank of a large lake where the water gently lapped against the shore. The sun was shining brightly and small puffy clouds floated lazily across the azure sky. Along the edges of the bay she could see thousands upon thousands of vibrant yellow daffodils, all growing in the dappled shade of a birch grove. A breeze, carrying with it the fresh scent of spring, caused the flowers to flutter and dance. All about her a feeling of peace and tranquillity ruled. The world she stood in now was unsullied by man's evil or malice. Here, indeed, was paradise.

"It's beautiful!" she said at last, her thoughts finally giving birth to her words. "The flowers, the colors, the scent--it's like breathing champagne!"

"You like it, madam?"

A man aged about eighty was facing her. He was dressed in a black cloak and wore a half-smile upon his weathered features. He gazed across at the flowers.

"I often come here," he said. "Whenever the doldrums of depression fall heavy on my countenance."

"You're very lucky," said Polly. "We have to rely on *Name That Fruit!!*"

*"Name That Fruit?"*

"It's a quiz show. You know. On the telly."

"Telly?"

"Yes, it's like the movies but with commercials."

He frowned at her without comprehension and looked at the lake again.

"I often come here," he said again. "Whenever the doldrums of depression fall heavy on my countenance."

"You said that already."

The old man looked as though he were awakening from a deep sleep.

"What are you doing here?"

"My husband sent me. My name is Polly Next."

"I come here when in vacant or pensive mood, you know."

He waved a hand in the direction of the flowers.

"The daffodils, you understand."

Polly looked across at the bright yellow flowers, which rustled back at her in the warm breeze.

"I wish my memory was this good," she murmured.

The figure in black smiled at her.

"The inward eye is all I have left," he said wistfully, the smile leaving his stern features. "Everything that I once was is now here; my life is contained in my works. A life in volumes of words; it is poetic."

He sighed deeply and added:

"But solitude isn't always blissful, you know."

He stared into the middle distance, the sun sparkling on the waters of the lake.

"How long since I died?" he asked abruptly.

"Over a hundred and fifty years."

"Really? Tell me, how did the revolution in France turn out?"

"It's a little early to tell."

Wordsworth frowned as the sun went in.

"Hello," he muttered, "I don't remember writing that--"

Polly looked. A large and very dark rain cloud had blotted out the sun.

"What do you--?" she began, but when she looked around Wordsworth had gone. The sky grew darker and thunder rumbled ominously in the distance. A strong wind sprang up and the lake seemed to freeze over and lose all depth as the daffodils stopped moving and became a solid mass of yellow and green. She cried out in fear as the sky and the lake met; the daffodils, trees and clouds returning to their place in the poem, individual words, sounds, squiggles on paper with no meanings other than those with which our own imagination can clothe them. She let out one last terrified scream

as the darkness swept on and the poem closed on top of her.

## 12.

### SpecOps-27: The Literary Detectives

. . . This morning Thursday Next joined the Litera Tec office in place of Crometty. I cannot help thinking that she is particularly unsuited to this area of work and I have my doubts as to whether she is as sane as she thinks she is. She has many demons, old and new, and I wonder whether Swindon is quite the right place to try and exorcise them . .

From Bowden Cable's diary

**T**HE SWINDON SpecOps headquarters were shared with the local police; the typically brusque and no-nonsense Germanic design had been built during the Occupation as a law court. It was big too, which was just as well. The way into the building was protected by metal detectors, and once I had shown my ID I walked into the large entrance hall. Officers and civilians with identity tags walked briskly amid the loud hubbub of the station. I was jostled once or twice in the throng and made a few greetings to old faces before fighting my way to the front desk. When I got there, I found a man in a white baggy shirt and breeches remonstrating with the sergeant. The officer just stared at him. He'd heard it all before.

"Name?" asked the desk sergeant wearily.

"John Milton."

"*Which* John Milton?"

John Milton sighed.

"Four hundred and ninety-six."

The sergeant made a note in his book.

"How much did they take?"

"Two hundred in cash and all my credit cards."

"Have you notified your bank?"

"Of course."

"And you think your assailant was a Percy Shelley?"

"Yes," replied the Milton. "He handed me this pamphlet on rejecting current religious dogma before he ran off."

"Hello, Ross," I said.

The sergeant looked at me, paused for a moment and then broke into a huge grin.

"Thursday! They told me you'd be coming back! Told me you made it all the way to SO-5 too."

I returned his smile. Ross had been the desk sergeant when I had



first joined the Swindon police.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "Starting up a regional office? SO-9 or something? Add a touch of spice to tired old Swindon?"

"Not exactly. I've transferred into the Litera Tec office."

A look of doubt crossed Ross's face but he quickly hid it.

"Great!" he enthused, slightly uneasily. "Drink later?"

I agreed happily, and after getting directions to the Litera Tec office, left Ross arguing with Milton 496.

I took the winding stair to the upper floor and then followed directions to the far end of the building. The entire west wing was filled with SpecOps or their regional departments. The Environmental SpecOps had an office here, as did Art Theft and the ChronoGuard. Even Spike had an office up here, although he was rarely seen in it; he preferred a dark and rather fetid lockup in the basement car park. The corridor was packed with bookcases and filing cabinets; the old carpet had almost worn through in the center. It was a far cry from the LiteraTec office in London, where we had enjoyed the most up-to-date information retrieval systems. At length I reached the correct door and knocked. I didn't receive an answer so I walked straight in.

The room was like a library from a country home somewhere. It was two stories high, with shelves crammed full of books covering every square inch of wall space. A spiral staircase led to a catwalk which ran around the wall, enabling access to the upper shelves. The middle of the room was open plan with desks laid out much like a library's reading room. Every possible surface and all the floor space were piled high with more books and papers, and I wondered how they managed to get anything done at all. About five officers were at work, but they didn't seem to notice me come in. A phone rang and a young man picked it up.

"Litera Tec office," he said in a polite voice. He winced as a tirade came down the phone line to him.

"I'm very sorry if you didn't like *Titus Andronicus*, madam," he said at last, "but I'm afraid it's got nothing to do with us-- perhaps you should stick to the comedies in future."

I could see Victor Analogy looking through a file with another officer. I walked to where he could see me and waited for him to finish.

"Ah, Next! Welcome to the office. Give me a moment, will you?"

I nodded and Victor carried on.

". . . I think Keats would have used less flowery prose than this and the third stanza is slightly clumsy in its construction. My feeling is that it's a clever fake, but check it against the Verse Meter Analyzer."

The officer nodded and walked off. Victor smiled at me and shook my hand.

"That was Finisterre. He looks after poetry forgery of the nineteenth century. Let me show you around."

He waved a hand in the direction of the bookshelves.

"Words are like leaves, Thursday. Like people really, fond of their own society."

He smiled.

"We have over a billion words here. Reference mainly. A good collection of major works and some minor ones that you won't even find in the Bodleian. We've got a storage facility in the basement. That's full as well. We need new premises but the Litera Tecs are a bit underfunded, to say the least."

He led me around one of the desks to where Bowden was sitting bolt upright, his jacket carefully folded across the back of his chair and his desk so neat as to be positively obscene.

"Bowden you've met. Fine fellow. He's been with us for twelve years and concentrates on nineteenth-century prose. He'll be showing you the ropes. That's your desk over there."

He paused for a moment, staring at the cleared desk. I was not supernumerary. One of their number had died recently and I was replacing him. Filling a dead man's shoes, sitting in a dead man's chair. Beyond the desk sat another officer, who was looking at me curiously.

"That's Fisher. He'll help you out with anything you want to know about legal copyright and contemporary fiction."

Fisher was a stocky man with an odd squint who appeared to be wider than he was tall. He looked up at me and grinned, revealing something left over from breakfast stuck between his teeth.

Victor carried on walking to the next desk.

"Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prose and poetry are looked after by Helmut Bight, kindly lent to us by our opposite number across the water. He came here to sort out a problem with some poorly translated Goethe and became embroiled with a neo-Nazi movement attempting to set Friedrich Nietzsche up as a fascist saint."

Herr Bight was about fifty and looked at me suspiciously. He wore a suit but had removed his tie in the heat.

"SO-5, eh?" asked Herr Bight, as though it were a form of venereal disease.

"I'm SO-27 just like you," I replied quite truthfully. "Eight years in the London office under Boswell."

Bight picked up an ancient-looking volume in a faded pigskin binding and passed it across to me.

"What do you make of this?"

I took the dusty tome in my hand and looked at the spine.

"*The Vanity of Human Wishes*," I read. "Written by Samuel Johnson

and published in 1749, the first work to appear in his own name."

I opened the book and flicked through the yellowed pages. "First edition. It would be very valuable, if--"

"If?--" repeated Bight.

I sniffed the paper and ran a finger across the page and then tasted it. I looked along the spine and tapped the cover, finally dropping the heavy volume on the desk with a thump.

"--if it were real."

"I'm impressed, Miss Next," admitted Herr Bight. "You and I must discuss Johnson some time."

"It wasn't as difficult as it looked," I had to admit. "Back in London we've got two pallet-loads of forged Johnsonia like this with a street value of over three hundred thousand pounds."

"London *too*?" exclaimed Bight in surprise. "We've been after this gang for six months; we thought they were local."

"Call Boswell at the London office; he'll help in any way he can. Just mention my name."

Herr Bight picked up the phone and asked the operator for a number. Victor guided me over to one of the many frosted-glass doors leading off the main chamber into side offices. He opened the door a crack to reveal two officers in shirtsleeves who were interviewing a man dressed in tights and an embroidered jacket.

"Malin and Sole look after all crimes regarding Shakespeare."

He shut the door.

"They keep an eye on forgery, illegal dealing and overtly free thespian interpretations. The actor in with them was Graham Huxtable. He was putting on a felonious one-man performance of *Twelfth Night*. Persistent offender. He'll be fined and bound over. His Malvolio is *truly* frightful."

He opened the door to another side office. A pair of identical twins were operating a large computing engine. The room was uncomfortably hot from the thousands of valves, and the clicking of relays was almost deafening. This was the only piece of modern technology that I had seen so far in the office.

"These are the Forty brothers, Jeff and Geoff. The Fortys operate the Verse Meter Analyzer. It breaks down any prose or poem into its components--words, punctuation, grammar and so forth--then compares that literary signature with a specimen of the target writer in its own memory. Eighty-nine percent accuracy. Very useful for spotting forgeries. We had what purported to be a page of an early draft of *Antony and Cleopatra*. It was rejected on the grounds that it had too many verbs per unit paragraph."

He closed the door.

"That's all of us. The man in overall charge of Swindon SpecOps is

Commander Braxton Hicks. He's answerable to the Regional Commander based in Salisbury. He leaves us alone most of the time, which is the way we like it. He also likes to see any new operatives the morning they arrive, so I suggest you go and have a word. He's in room twenty-eight down the corridor."

We retraced our steps back to my desk. Victor wished me well again and then disappeared to consult with Helmut about some pirate copies of *Doctor Faustus* that had appeared on the market with the endings rewritten to be happy.

I sat down in my chair and opened the desk drawer. There was nothing in it; not so much as a pencil shaving. Bowden was watching me.

"Victor emptied it the morning after Crometty's murder."

"James Crometty," I murmured. "Suppose you tell me about him?"

Bowden picked up a pencil and tried to balance it on its sharp end.

"Crometty worked mainly in nineteenth-century prose and poetry. He was an excellent officer but excitable. He had little time for procedure. He vanished one evening when he said he had a tip-off about a rare manuscript. We found him a week later in the abandoned Raven public house on Morgue Road. They had shot him six times in the face."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I've lost friends before," said Bowden, his voice never wavering from the measured pace of speech he used, "but he was a close friend and colleague and I would gladly have taken his place."

He rubbed his nose slightly; it was the only sign of outward emotion that he had shown.

"I consider myself a spiritual man, Miss Next, although I am not religious. By spiritual I merely mean that I feel I have good in my soul and am inclined to follow the correct course of action given a prescribed set of circumstances. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"Having said that, I would still be very keen to end the life of the person who did this foul deed. I have been practicing on the range and now carry a pistol full time; look--"

"Show me later, Mr. Cable. Do you have any leads?"

"None. Nothing at all. We don't know who he was seeing or why. I have contacts over at Homicide; they have nothing either."

"Being shot six times in the face is the mark of a person with a gleeful passion for the undertaking of their duties," I told him. "Even if Crometty had been carrying a gun I don't think it would have made much difference."

"You could be right," sighed Bowden. "I can't think of a single time that a pistol has been drawn on a Litera Tec investigation."

I agreed. Ten years ago in London it had been the same. But big business and the huge amounts of cash in the sale and distribution of literary works had attracted a bigger criminal element. I knew of at least four London Litera Tecs who had died in the line of duty.

"It's becoming more violent out there. It's not like it is in the movies. Did you hear about the surrealist riot in Chichester last night?"

"I certainly did," he replied. "I can see Swindon involved in similar disturbances before too long. The art college nearly had a riot on its hands last year when the governors dismissed a lecturer who had been secretly encouraging students to embrace abstract expressionism. They wanted him charged under the Interpretation of the Visual Medium Act. He fled to Russia, I think."

I looked at my watch.

"I have to go and see the SpecOps commander."

Bowden allowed a rare smile to creep upon his serious features.

"I bid you good luck. If you would permit me to offer you some advice, keep your automatic out of sight. Despite James's untimely death, Commander Hicks doesn't want to see the Litera Tecs permanently armed. He believes that our place is firmly at a desk."

I thanked him, left my automatic in the desk drawer and walked down the corridor. I knocked twice and was invited into the outer office by a young clerk. I told him my name and he asked me to wait.

"The Commander won't be long. Fancy a cup of coffee?"

"No thanks."

The clerk looked at me curiously.

"They say you've come from London to avenge Jim Crometty's death. They say you killed two men. They say your father's face can stop a clock. Is this true?"

"It depends on how you look at it. Office rumors are pretty quick to get started, aren't they?"

Braxton Hicks opened the door to his office and beckoned me in. He was a tall, thin man with a large mustache and a gray complexion. He had bags under his eyes; it didn't look as though he slept much. The room was far more austere than any commander's office I had ever seen. Several golf bags were leaning against the wall, and I could see that a carpet putter had been hastily pushed to one side.

He smiled genially and offered me a seat before sitting himself.

"Cigarette?"

"I don't, thank you."

"Neither do I."

He stared at me for a moment and drummed his long fingers on the immaculately clear desk. He opened a folder in front of him and read in silence for a moment. He was reading my SO-5 file; obviously he

and Analogy didn't get on well enough to swap information between clearances.

"Operative Thursday Next, eh?" His eyes flicked across the pertinent points of my career. "Quite a record. Police, Crimea, rejoined the police, then moved to London in '75. Why was that?"

"Advancement, sir."

Braxton Hicks grunted and continued reading.

"SpecOps for eight years, twice commended. Recently loaned to SO-5. Your stay with the latter has been heavily censored, yet it says here you were wounded in action."

He looked over his spectacles at me.

"Did you return fire?"

"No."

"Good."

"I fired first."

"*Not* so good."

Braxton stroked his mustache thoughtfully.

"You were operative grade one in the London office working on Shakespeare, no less. Very prestigious. Yet you swap that for a grade three operative assignment in a backwater like this. Why?"

"Times change and we change with them, sir."

Braxton grunted and closed the file.

"Here at SpecOps my responsibility is not only with the LiteraTecs, but also Art Theft, Vampirism & Lycanthropy, the ChronoGuard, Antiterrorism, Civil Order and the dog pound. Do you play golf?"

"No, sir."

"Shame, shame. Where was I? Oh yes. Out of all those departments, do you know which I fear most?"

"I've no idea, sir."

"I'll tell you. None of them. The thing I fear most is SpecOps regional budget meetings. Do you realize what that means, Next?"

"No, sir."

"It means that every time one of you puts in for extra overtime or a special request, I go over budget and it makes my head hurt right *here*."

He pointed to his left temple.

"And I don't like that. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

He picked up my file again and waved it at me.

"I heard you had a spot of bother in the big city. Other operatives getting killed. It's a whole new different alternative kettle of fish here, y'know. We crunch data for a living. If you want to arrest someone then have uniform do it. No running about shooting up bad guys, no overtime and definitely no twenty-four-hour surveillance operations.

Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, about Hades."

My heart leaped; I had thought *that* would have been censored, if anything.

"I understand you think he is still alive?"

I thought for a moment. My eyes flicked to the file Hicks was holding. He divined my thoughts.

"Oh, that's not in here, my dear girl. I may be a hick commander in the boonies, but I do have my sources. You think he is still alive?"

I knew I could trust Victor and Bowden, but about Hicks I was not so sure. I didn't think I would risk it.

"A symptom of stress, sir. Hades is dead."

He plonked my file in the out-tray, leaned back in his chair and stroked his mustache, something he obviously enjoyed.

"So you're not here to try and find him?"

"Why would Hades be in Swindon if he were alive, sir?"

Braxton looked uneasy for a moment.

"Quite, quite."

He smiled and stood up, indicating that the interview was at an end.

"Good, well, run along. One piece of advice. Learn to play golf; you'll find it a very rewarding and relaxing game. This is a copy of the department's budget account and this is a list of all the local golf courses. Study them well. Good luck."

I went out and closed the door after me.

The clerk looked up.

"Did he mention the budget?"

"I don't think he mentioned anything else. Do you have a waste bin?"

The clerk smiled and pushed it out with his foot. I dumped the heavy document in it unceremoniously.

"Bravo," he said.

As I was about to open the door to leave a short man in a blue suit came powering through without looking. He was reading a fax and knocked against me as he went straight through to Braxton's office without a word. The clerk was watching me for my reaction.

"Well, well," I murmured, "Jack Schitt."

"You know him?"

"Not socially."

"As much charm as an open grave," said the clerk, who had obviously warmed to me since I binned the budget. "Steer clear of him. Goliath, you know."

I looked at the closed door to Braxton's office.

"What's he here for?"

The secretary shrugged, gave me a conspiratorial wink and said very pointedly and slowly:

"I'll get that coffee you wanted and it was *two* sugars, wasn't it?"

"No thanks, not for me."

"No, no," he replied. "*Two* sugars, *TWO* sugars."

He was pointing at the intercom on his desk.

"Heavens above!" he exploded. "Do I have to spell it out?"

The penny dropped. The clerk gave a wan smile and scurried out of the door. I quickly sat down, flipped up the lever marked "two" on the intercom and leaned closer to listen.

"I don't like it when you don't knock, Mr. Schitt."

"I'm devastated, Braxton. Does she know anything about Hades?"

"She says not."

"She's lying. She's here for a purpose. If I find Hades first we can get rid of her."

"Less of the *we*, Jack," said Braxton testily. "Please remember that I have given Goliath my full cooperation, but you are working under my jurisdiction and have only the powers that I bestow upon you. Powers that I can revoke at any time. We do this my way or not at all. Do you understand?"

Schitt was unperturbed. He replied in a condescending manner:

"Of course, Braxton, as long as you understand that if this thing blows up in your face the Goliath Corporation will hold you personally responsible."

I sat down at my empty desk again. There seemed to be a lot going on in the office that I wasn't a part of. Bowden laid his hand on my shoulder and made me jump.

"I'm sorry, I didn't wish to startle you. Did you get the commander's budget speech?"

"And more. Jack Schitt went into his office as though he owned the place."

Bowden shrugged.

"Since he's Goliath, then the chances are he does."

Bowden picked his jacket up from the back of his chair and folded it neatly across his arm.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Lunch, then a lead in the *Chuzzlewit* theft. I'll explain on the way. Do you have a car?"

Bowden wasn't too impressed when he saw the multicolored Porsche.



"This is hardly what one might refer to as low profile."

"On the contrary," I replied, "who would have thought a Litera Tec would drive a car like this? Besides, I *have* to drive it."

He got in the passenger seat and looked around slightly disdainfully at the spartan interior.

"Is there a problem, Miss Next? You're staring."

Now that Bowden was in the passenger seat I had suddenly realized where I had seen him before. He had been the passenger when the car had appeared in front of me at the hospital. Events had indeed started to fall into place.

## 14.

### Lunch with Bowden

Bowden Cable is the sort of honest and dependable operative that is the backbone of SpecOps. They never win commendations or medals and the public has no knowledge of them at all. They are all worth ten of people like me.

THURSDAY NEXT

--*A Life in SpecOps*

**B**OWDEN GUIDED me to a transport cafe on the old Oxford road. I thought it was an odd choice for lunch; the seats were hard orange plastic and the yellowing Formica-covered tabletops had started to lift at the edges. The windows were almost opaque with dirt and the nylon net curtains hung heavily with deposits of grease. Several flypapers dangled from the ceiling, their potency long worn off, the flies stuck to them long since desiccated to dust. Somebody had made an effort to make the interior slightly more cheery by sticking up a few pictures hastily cut from old calendars; a signed photo of the 1978 England soccer team was hung above a fireplace that had been filled in and then decorated with a vase full of plastic flowers.

"Are you sure?" I asked, sitting gingerly at a table near the window.

"The food's good," responded Bowden, as though that was all that mattered.

A gum-chewing waitress came up to the table and put some bent cutlery in front of us. She was about fifty and was wearing a uniform that might have been her mother's.

"Hello, Mr. Cable," she said in a flat tone with only a sliver of interest in her voice, "all well?"

"Very well, thank you. Lottie, I'd like you to meet my new partner, Thursday Next."

Lottie looked at me oddly.

"Any relation to Captain Next?"

"He was my brother," I said loudly, as if wanting Lottie to know that I wasn't ashamed of the connection, "and he didn't do what they said he did."

The waitress stared at me for a moment, as if wanting to say something but not daring.

"What will you lot have, then?" she asked instead with forced cheerfulness. She had lost someone in the charge; I could sense it.

"What's the special?" asked Bowden.

"*Soupe d'Auvergne au fromage*," replied Lottie, "followed by *rojoes cominho*."

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's braised pork with cumin, coriander and lemon," replied Bowden.

"Sounds great."

"Two specials please and a carafe of mineral water."

She nodded, scribbled a note and gave me a sad smile before departing.

Bowden looked at me with interest. He would have guessed eventually that I was ex-military. I wore it badly.

"Crimea veteran, eh? Did you know Colonel Phelps was in town?"

"I bumped into him on the airship yesterday. He wanted me to go to one of his rallies."

"Will you?"

"You must be kidding. His idea of the perfect end to the Crimean conflict is for us to fight and fight until there is no one left alive and the peninsula's a poisoned and mined land no good for anything. I'm hoping that the UN can bring both governments to their senses."

"I was called up in '78," said Bowden. "Even got past basic training. Fortunately it was the same year the czar died and the crown prince took over. There were more pressing demands on the young emperor's time, so the Russians withdrew. I was never needed."

"I was reading somewhere that since the war started, only seven years of the one hundred and thirty-one have actually been spent fighting."

"But when they do," added Bowden, "they certainly make up for it."

I looked at him. He had taken a sip of water after offering the carafe to me first.

"Married? Kids?"

"No," replied Bowden. "I haven't really had time to find myself a wife, although I am not against the idea in principle. It's just that SpecOps is not really a great place for meeting people and I'm not, I confess, a great socializer. I've been short-listed for a post opening the equivalent of a Litera Tec office in Ohio; it seems to me the perfect opportunity to take a wife."

"The money's good over there and the facilities are excellent. I'd consider it myself given the opportunity," I replied. I meant it too.

"Would you? Would you really?" asked Bowden with a flush of excitement that was curiously at odds with his slightly cold demeanor.

"Sure. Change of scenery," I stammered, wanting to change the subject in case Bowden got the wrong idea. "Have you . . . ah . . . been a Litera Tec long?"

Bowden thought for a moment.

"Ten years. I came from Cambridge with a degree in nineteenth-century literature and joined the LiteraTecs straight away. Jim Crometty looked after me from the moment I started."

He stared out of the window wistfully.

"Perhaps if I'd been there--"

"--then you'd both be dead. Anyone who shoots a man six times in the face doesn't go to Sunday school. He'd have killed you and not even thought about it. There's little to be gained in what ifs; believe me, I know. I lost two fellow officers to Hades. I've been over it all a hundred times, yet it would probably happen exactly the same way if I had another chance."

Lottie placed the soup in front of us with a basket of freshly baked bread.

"Enjoy," said Lottie, "it's on the house."

"But!--" I began. Lottie silenced me.

"Save your breath," she said impassively. "After the charge. After the shit hit the fan. After the first wave of death--you went back to do what you could. *You went back*. I value that." She turned and left.

The soup was good; the *rojoes cominho* even better.

"Victor told me you worked on Shakespeare up in London," said Bowden.

It was the most prestigious area in which to work in the LiteraTec office. Lake poetry was a close second and Restoration comedy after that. Even in the most egalitarian of offices, a pecking order always established itself.

"There was very little room for promotion in the London office so after a couple of years I was given the Shakespeare work," I replied, tearing at a piece of bread. "We get a lot of trouble from Baconians in London."

Bowden looked up.

"How do you rate the Baconian theory?"

"Not much. Like many people I'm pretty sure there is more to Shakespeare than just Shakespeare. But Sir Francis Bacon using a little-known actor as a front? I just don't buy it."

"He was a trained lawyer," asserted Bowden. "Many of the plays have legal parlance to them."

"It means nothing," I replied, "Greene, Nashe and especially Ben Jonson use legal phraseology; none of them had legal training. And don't even get me started on the so-called codes."

"No need to worry about *that*," replied Bowden. "I won't. I'm no Baconian either. He didn't write them."

"And what would make you so sure?"

"If you read his *De Augmentis Scientiarum* you'll find Bacon actually criticizing popular drama. Furthermore, when the troupe Shakespeare

belonged to applied to the king to form a theater, they were referred to the commissioner for suits. Guess who was on that panel and most vociferously opposed the application?"

"Francis Bacon?" I asked.

"Exactly. Whoever wrote the plays, it wasn't Bacon. I've formulated a few theories of my own over the years. Have you ever heard of Edward De Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford?"

"Vaguely."

"There is some proof that, unlike Bacon, he could actually write and write quite well--hang on."

Lottie had brought a phone to the table. It was for Bowden. He wiped his mouth with a napkin.

"Yes?"

He looked up at me.

"Yes, she is. We'll be right over. Thanks."

"Problems?"

"It's your aunt and uncle. I don't know how to say this but . . . they've been kidnapped!"

There were several police and SpecOps cars clustered around the entrance to my mother's house when we pulled up. A small crowd had assembled and was peering over the fence. The dodos had gathered on the other side and were staring back, wondering what the fuss was all about. I showed my badge to the officer on duty.

"Litera Tec?" he said scornfully. "Can't let you in, ma'am. Police and SpecOps-9 only."

"He's my uncle!--" I said angrily, and the officer reluctantly let me through. Swindon was the same as London: A Litera Tec's badge held about as much authority as a bus pass. I found my mother in the living room surrounded by damp Kleenex. I sat beside her and asked her what had happened.

She blew her nose noisily.

"I called them in for dinner at one. It was snorkers, Mycroft's favorite. There was no answer so I went down to his workshop. They were both gone and the double doors wide open. Mycroft wouldn't have gone out without saying anything."

This was true. Mycroft never left the house unless it was absolutely necessary; since Owens had been meringued Polly did all his running around.

"Anything stolen?" I asked a SpecOps-9 operative who stared at me coldly. He didn't relish being asked questions by a Litera Tec.

"Who knows?" he replied with little emotion. "I understand you'd been in his workshop recently?"

"Yesterday evening."

"Then perhaps you can have a look around and tell *us* if there is anything missing?"

I was escorted to Mycroft's workshop. The rear doors had been forced and I looked around carefully. The table where Mycroft had kept all his bookworms had been cleared; all I could see was the massive two-pronged power lead that would have slotted into the back of the Prose Portal.

"There was something right here. Several goldfish bowls full up with small worms and a large book a bit like a medieval church Bible--"

"Can you draw it?" asked a familiar voice. I turned to see Jack Schitt lurking in the shadows, smoking a small cigarette and overseeing a Goliath technician who was passing a humming sensor over the ground.

"Well, well," I said. "If it isn't Jack Schitt. What's Goliath's interest in my uncle?"

"Can you draw it?" he repeated.

I nodded, and one of the Goliath men gave me a pencil and paper. I sketched out what I had seen, the intricate combination of dials and knobs on the front of the book and the heavy brass straps. Jack Schitt took it from me and studied it with great interest as another Goliath technician walked in from outside.

"Well?" asked Schitt.

The agent saluted neatly and showed Schitt a pair of large and slightly molten G-clamps.

"Professor Next had jury-rigged his own set of cables to the electrical substation just next door. I spoke to the electricity board. They said they had three unexplained power drains of about one point eight megawatts each late last night."

Jack Schitt turned to me.

"You better leave this to us, Next," he said. "Kidnapping and theft are not part of the Litera Tec's responsibility."

"Who did this?" I demanded, but Schitt didn't take crap from anyone--least of all me. He wagged a finger in my direction.

"This investigation is nothing to do with you; we'll keep you informed of any developments. Or not. As I see fit."

He turned and walked away.

"It was Acheron, wasn't it?" I said, slowly and deliberately. Schitt stopped in midstride, and turned to face me.

"Acheron is dead, Next. Burned to a crisp at junction twelve. Don't spread your theories around town, girl. It might make you seem more unstable than you actually are."

He smiled without the least vestige of kindness and walked out of the workshop to his waiting car.

## 15.

### Hello & Goodbye, Mr. Quaverley

Few people remember Mr. Quaverley anymore. If you had read *Martin Chuzzlewit* prior to 1985 you would have come across a minor character who lived in Mrs. Todger's boarding house. He discoursed freely with the Pecksniffs on the subject of butterflies, of which he knew almost nothing. Sadly, he is no longer there. His hat is hanging on the hat rack at the bottom of page 235, but that is all that remains . . .

MILLON DE FLOSS

-- *Thursday Next Casebook*, Volume 6

**A**STOUNDING!" SAID Acheron quietly as he surveyed Mycroft's Prose Portal. "*Truly* astounding!"

Mycroft said nothing. He had been too busy wondering whether Polly was still alive and well since the poem closed on her. Against his protestations they had pulled the plug before the portal had reopened; he didn't know if any human could survive in such an environment. They had blindfolded him during the journey and he was now standing in the smoking lounge of what had once been a large and luxurious hotel. Although still grand, the decor was tatty and worn. The pearl-inlaid grand piano didn't look as though it had been tuned for years, and the mirror-backed bar was sadly devoid of any refreshment. Mycroft looked out of the window for a clue as to where he was being held. It wasn't hard to guess. The large quantity of drab-colored Griffin motorcars and the absence of any advertising hoardings told Mycroft all he needed to know; he was in the People's Republic of Wales, somewhere well out of reach of the conventional law enforcement agencies. The possibility of escape was slim, and if he could get away, what then? Even if there was a chance he could make it back across the border, he would never be able to leave without Polly--she was still imprisoned in the poem, itself now little more than printed words on a scrap of paper that Hades had placed in his breast pocket. There seemed to be little chance of regaining the poem without a fearsome struggle, and besides, without the bookworms and the Prose Portal, Polly would stay in her Wordsworthian prison forever. Mycroft bit his lip nervously and turned his attention to the other people in the room. Besides himself and Hades there were four others--and two of them held guns.

"Welcome, Professor Next," said Hades as he grinned broadly, "from one genius to another!"

He gazed fondly at the machine. He ran a finger along the rim of one of the goldfish bowls. The worms were busy reading a copy of *Mansfield Park* and were discussing where Sir Thomas got his money from.

"I can't do this alone, you know," said Hades without looking up. One of the other men shuffled to get more comfortable on one of the few original upholstered armchairs.

"The next step for me is to gain your full support." He looked at Mycroft with a serious expression. "You *will* help me, won't you?"

"I would sooner die!" replied Mycroft coldly.

Acheron looked at him, then broke into another broad grin.

"I don't doubt it for one moment, but I'm being rude! I have abducted you and stolen your life's work and haven't even introduced myself!" He walked up to Mycroft and shook him warmly by the hand, a gesture that Mycroft didn't return.

"My name is Hades, Acheron Hades. Perhaps you've heard of me?"

"Acheron the extortionist?" asked Mycroft slowly. "Acheron the kidnapper and the blackmailer?"

Acheron's smile didn't leave his lips.

"Yes, yes and yes. But you forgot murderer. Forty-two times a murderer, my friend. The first one is always the hardest. After that it doesn't really matter, they can only hang you once. It's a bit like eating a packet of shortbread; you can never just have one piece." He laughed again. "I had a run-in with your niece, you know. She survived, although," he added, in case Mycroft erroneously believed there was a vestige of goodness in his dark soul, "that wasn't the way I had planned it."

"Why are you doing this?" asked Mycroft.

"Why?" repeated Acheron. "Why? Why, for *fame*, of course!" he boomed. "You see, gentlemen?--" The others nodded obediently. "Fame!" he repeated. "And you can share that fame!--"

He ushered Mycroft over to his desk and dug out a file of press clippings.

"Look what the papers say about me!"

He held up a cutting proudly.

HADES 74 WEEKS AT TOP OF

"MOST-WANTED" LIST

"Impressive, eh?" he said proudly. "How about this one?"

TOAD READERS VOTE HADES

"LEAST FAVORITE PERSON"

"*The Owl* said that execution was too good for me and *The Mole*



wanted Parliament to reintroduce breaking on the wheel."

He showed the snippet to Mycroft.

"What do you think?"

"I think," began Mycroft, "that you could have used your vast intellect far more usefully by serving mankind instead of stealing from it."

Acheron looked hurt.

"Where's the fun in that? Goodness is weakness, pleasantness is poisonous, serenity is mediocrity and kindness is for losers. The best reason for committing loathsome and detestable acts--and let's face it, I am considered something of an expert in this field--is purely for their own sake. Monetary gain is all very well, but it dilutes the taste of wickedness to a lower level that is obtainable by almost anyone with an overdeveloped sense of avarice. True and baseless evil is as rare as the purest good--"

"I'd like to go home."

"Of course!" said Acheron, smiling. "Hobbes, open the door."

The man nearest the door opened it and stepped aside. The large door led to the lobby of the old hotel.

"I don't speak Welsh," murmured Mycroft.

Hobbes shut the door and rebolted it.

"Bit of a drawback in Merthyr, old boy," said Acheron, smiling. "You'd not get far without it."

Mycroft looked at Hades uneasily.

"But Polly!--"

"Ah, yes!" replied Hades. "Your delightful wife." He pulled out the copy of "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" and produced a large gold lighter, which he ignited with a flourish.

"No!--" cried Mycroft, taking several steps forward. Acheron arched an eyebrow, the flame nearly touching the paper.

"I'll stay and help you," said Mycroft wearily.

A broad grin broke out on Hades's features. He put the poem back in his pocket.

"Stout fellow! You won't regret this."

He thought for a moment.

"Actually, you probably will."

Mycroft sat unsteadily on a handy chair.

"By the by," went on Hades, "have I introduced you to all my fiendish compatriots?"

Mycroft shook his head sadly.

"No? Most remiss. The man with the gun over there is Mr. Delamare. His obedience is matched only by his stupidity. He does everything I say and would die for me if necessary. A sort of human red setter, if you will. He has an IQ below that of a Neanderthal and

believes only what he reads in *The Gad-fly*. Mr. Delamare, my friend, have you committed your wicked act today?"

"Yes, Mr. Hades. I drove at seventy-three miles per hour."

Hades frowned.

"That doesn't sound very wicked."

Delamare chuckled.

"Through the mall?"

Hades wagged an approving finger and smiled a wicked smile.

"Very good."

"Thank you, Mr. Hades."

"Over there is Mr. Hobbes. He is an actor of some distinction whose talents the English Shakespeare Company foolishly decides to ignore. We will try and rectify that fault; is that not so, Mr. Hobbes?"

"It is, sire," responded Mr. Hobbes, bowing low with a flourish. He was dressed in tights, a leather jerkin and codpiece. He had been passed over for every major part with the ESC for ten years, relegated to walk-ons and understudying. He had become so dangerously unstable that even the other actors noticed. He had joined up with Acheron shortly after his escape from a lengthy prison sentence; pushing thespian interpretation to the limits, he had killed Laertes for real while playing Hamlet.

"The third man over there is Muller, a doctor whom I befriended after he was struck off. The particulars are a bit sordid. We'll talk about it over dinner some time, as long as we're not eating steak tartar. The fourth man is Felix<sup>7</sup>, who is one of my most trusted companions. He can remember no farther than a week in the past and has no aspirations for the future. He thinks only of the work he has been assigned to carry out. He is without conscience, mercy or pity. A fine man. We should have more like him."

Hades clapped his hands together happily.

"Shall we get to work? I haven't committed a singularly debauched act for almost an hour."

Mycroft reluctantly walked over to the Prose Portal and started to ready it. The bookworms were fed, watered and cleaned, power supplies were laid on and all the details in the child's exercise book neatly followed. As Mycroft worked, Acheron sat down and flicked through an old manuscript filled with spidery writing, replete with scribbled corrections and bound up with faded red ribbon. He skipped through various sections until he found what he was looking for.

"Perfect!" he chortled.

Mycroft finished the testing procedure and stepped back.

"It's ready," he sighed.

"Excellent!" Acheron beamed as he handed over the aged manuscript.

"Open the portal just here."

He tapped the page and smiled. Mycroft slowly took the manuscript and looked at the title.

"*Martin Chuzzlewit!* Fiend!"

"Flattery will get you nowhere, my dear professor."

"But," continued Mycroft, "if you alter anything in the original manuscript!--"

"But that's the *point*, isn't it, my dear Mycroft," said Hades, clasping one of Mycroft's cheeks between finger and thumb and shaking gently. "That's . . . the . . . point. What good is extortion unless you show everyone what massive damage you could do if you wanted? And anyway, where's the fun in robbing banks? Bang, bang, give me the money? Besides, killing civilians is never any *real* fun. It's a bit like shooting rabbits that have been pegged to the ground. Give me a SWAT platoon to deal with any day."

"But the damage!--" continued Mycroft. "Are you mad!?"

Acheron's eyes flashed angrily as he grasped Mycroft tightly by the throat.

"What? What did you say? *Mad*, did you say? Hmm? Eh? What? *What?*"

His fingers tightened on Mycroft's windpipe; the professor could feel himself start to sweat in the cold panic of suffocation. Acheron was waiting for an answer that Mycroft was unable to utter.

"What? What did you say?"

Acheron's pupils started to dilate as Mycroft felt a dark veil fall over his mind.

"Think it's *fun* being christened with a name like mine? Having to live up to what is expected of one? Born with an intellect so vast that all other humans are cretins by comparison?"

Mycroft managed to give out a choke and Acheron slackened his grip. Mycroft fell to the floor, gulping for breath. Acheron stood over him and wagged a reproachful finger.

"Don't *ever* call me mad, Mycroft. I'm not mad, I'm just . . . well, *differently moraled*, that's all."

Hades handed him *Chuzzlewit* again and Mycroft needed no second bidding. He placed the worms with the manuscript inside the heavy old book; within half an hour of feverish activity the device was primed and set.

"It is ready," announced Mycroft miserably. "I have only to press this button and the door will open. It will stay open for ten seconds at most."

He sighed deeply and shook his head.

"May God forgive me!--"

"I forgive you," replied Acheron. "It's the closest you'll get!"

Hades walked across to Hobbes, who was now dressed in black combat gear. He wore a webbing harness around his waist upon which hung all sorts of items that might be of use on an unplanned armed robbery--a large torch, bolt cutters, rope, handcuffs and an automatic.

"You know who it is you are after?"

"Mr. Quaverley, sir."

"Splendid. I feel a speech coming on."

He climbed onto a carved oak table.

"My friends!" he began. "This is a very *great* day for science and a very *bad* one for Dickensian literature."

He paused for dramatic effect.

"Comrades, we stand on the very brink of an act of artistic barbarism so monstrous that I am almost ashamed of it myself. All of you have been my faithful servants for many years, and although none of you possesses a soul quite as squalid as mine, and the faces I see before me are both stupid and unappealing, I regard you all with no small measure of fondness."

His four comrades mumbled their thanks.

"Silence! I think it is fair to say that I am the most debased individual on this planet and quite the most brilliant criminal mind this century. The plan that we embark upon now is easily the most diabolical ever devised by man, and will not only take you to the top of everyone's most-wanted list but will also make you wealthy beyond your wildest dreams of avarice." He clapped his hands together. "So let the adventure begin, and here's to the success of our finest criminal endeavor!"

"Sir?"

"What is it, Dr. Muller?"

"All that money. I'm not so sure. I'd settle for a Gainsborough. You know--that one of the kid in the blue suit."

Acheron stared at him for a moment, a smile slowly breaking across his features.

"Why not? Odious *and* art-loving! What a divine dichotomy! You shall have your Gainsborough! And now, let us--What is it, Hobbes?"

"You won't forget to make the ESC put on my improved version of the Scottish play--*Macbeth: No More 'Mr. Nice Guy'*?"

"Of course not."

"A full eight-week run?"

"Yes, yes, and *Midsummer Night's Dream* with chainsaws. Mr. Delamare, is there anything that *you* require?"

"Well," said the man with the brain of a dog, rubbing the back of his head thoughtfully, "could I have a motorway services named after my mum?"

"Insufferably obtuse," remarked Acheron. "I don't think that should

be too difficult. Felix7?"

"I require no payment," said Felix7 stoically. "I am merely your willing servant. To serve a good and wise master is the best that can be expected of any sentient being."

"I love that man!" said Hades to the others. He chuckled to himself and then turned back to Hobbes, who was waiting to make the jump.

"So you understand what it is you have to do?"

"Perfectly."

"Then, Mycroft, open the portal and my dear Hobbes: Godspeed!"

Mycroft pressed the green "open" button and there was a bright flash and a strong electromagnetic pulse that had every compass for miles around spinning wildly. The portal opened rapidly and Hobbes took a deep breath and stepped through; as he did, Mycroft pressed the red "close" button, the portal slid shut and a hush descended on the room. Acheron looked at Mycroft, who stared at the timer on the large book. Dr. Muller read a paperback of *Martin Chuzzlewit* to check Hobbes's progress, Felix7 kept an eye on Mycroft, and Delamare looked at something sticky he had found inside his ear.

Two minutes later Mycroft pressed the green "open" button once more and Hobbes came back through, dragging a middle-aged man dressed in a badly fitting suit with high collar and necktie. Hobbes was quite out of breath and sat on a nearby chair, panting. The middle-aged man looked around him in mystification.

"My friends," he began, looking at their curious faces, "you find me in a disadvantaged state. Pray explain the meaning of what I can only describe as a bewildering predicament--"

Acheron walked up to him and placed a friendly arm around his shoulders.

"Ah, the sweet, sweet smell of success. Welcome to the twentieth century and reality. My name is Hades."

Acheron extended a hand. The man bowed and shook it gratefully, mistakenly believing he had fallen among friends.

"Your servant, Mr. Hades. My name is Mr. Quaverley, resident of Mrs. Todger's and a proctor by trade. I have to confess that I have no small notion of the large wonder that has been subjected to me, but pray tell me, since I see you are the master of this paradox, what has happened and how I can be of assistance."

Acheron smiled and patted Mr. Quaverley's shoulder affectionately.

"My dear Mr. Quaverley! I could spend many happy hours in discussion with you about the essence of Dickensian narrative, but it would really be a waste of my precious time. Felix7, return to Swindon and leave Mr. Quaverley's body where it will be found in the morning."

Felix7 took Mr. Quaverley firmly by the arm.

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and Felix7--"

"Yes, sir?"

"While you're out, why don't you quiet down that Sturmev Archer fellow? He's of no earthly use to us anymore."

Felix7 dragged Mr. Quaverley out of the door. Mycroft was weeping.

## 16.

### Sturmey Archer & Felix7

. . . The finest criminal mind requires the finest accomplices to accompany him. Otherwise, what's the point? I always found that I could never apply my most deranged plans without someone to share and appreciate them. I'm like that. Very *generous* . . .

ACHERON HADES

--*Degeneracy for Pleasure and Profit*

**SO** WHO is this guy we're going to see?"

"Fellow named Sturmey Archer," replied Bowden as I pulled my car into the curb. We found ourselves opposite a small factory unit that had a gentle glow of light showing through the windows.

"A few years ago Crometty and myself had the extreme good fortune to arrest several members of a gang which had been attempting to peddle a rather poorly forged sequel to Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.' It was entitled 'Rime II--The Mariner Returneth' but no one had been fooled. Sturmey avoided jail by turning state's evidence. I've got some dirt on him about a *Cardenio* scam. I don't want to use it, but I will if I have to."

"What makes you think he has anything to do with Crometty's death?"

"Nothing," said Bowden simply. "He's just next on the list."

We walked across in the gathering dusk. The streetlights were flickering on and the stars were beginning to appear in the twilight sky. In another half hour it would be night.

Bowden thought about knocking but didn't bother. He opened the door noiselessly and we crept in.

Sturmey Archer was a feeble-looking character who had spent too many years in institutions to be able to look after himself properly. Without designated bathtimes he didn't wash and without fixed mealtimes he went hungry. He wore thick glasses and mismatched clothes and his face was a moonscape of healed acne. He made part of his living these days by casting busts of famous writers in plaster of paris, but he had too much bad history to be kept on the straight. Other criminals blackmailed him into helping them and Sturmey, already a weak man, could do little to resist. It wasn't surprising that, out of his forty-six years, only twenty had been spent at liberty.

Inside the workshop we came across a large workbench on which were placed about five hundred foot-high busts of Will Shakespeare,

all of them in various states of completion. A large vat of plaster of paris lay empty next to a rack containing twenty rubber casts; it seemed Sturmey had a big order on.

Archer himself was at the back of the shop indulging in his second profession, repairing Will-Speak machines. He had his hand up the back of an Othello as we crept up behind him.

The mannequin's crude voice-box crackled as Sturmey made some trifling adjustments:

*It is the cause, it is the cause, (click) yet I'll not shed a drop of her blood, (click) nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow . . .*

"Hello, Sturmey," said Bowden.

Sturmey jumped and shorted out the Othello's controls. The dummy opened its eyes wide and gave out a terrified cry of *MONUMENTAL ALABASTER!* before falling limp. Sturmey glared at Bowden.

"Creeping around at night, Mr. Cable? Hardly like a LiteraTec, is it?"

Bowden smiled.

"Let's just say I'm rediscovering the joys of fieldwork. This is my new partner, Thursday Next."

Archer nodded at me suspiciously. Bowden continued:

"You heard about Jim Crometty, Sturmey?"

"I heard," replied Archer with feigned sadness.

"I wondered if you had any information you might want to impart?"

"Me?"

He pointed at the plaster busts of Will Shakespeare.

"Look at those. A fiver each wholesale to a Jap company that wants ten thou. The Japanese have built a seven-eighths-scale replica of Stratford-upon-Avon near Yokohama and love all this crap. Fifty grand, Cable, *that's* literature I can relate to."

"And the *Chuzzlewit* manuscript?" I asked. "How do you relate to that?"

He jumped visibly as I spoke.

"I don't," shrugged Sturmey in an unconvincing manner.

"Listen, Sturmey," said Bowden, who had picked up on Archer's nervousness, "I'd be really, really sorry to have to pull you in for questioning about that *Cardenio* scam."

Archer's lower lip trembled; his eyes darted between the two of us anxiously.

"I don't know *anything*, Mr. Cable," he whined. "Besides, you don't know what he would do."

"*Who* would do *what*, Sturmey?"

Then I heard it. A slight *click* behind us. I pushed Bowden in front of me; he tripped and collapsed on top of Sturmey, who gave a small cry that was drowned out by the loud concussion of a shotgun going off at close quarters. We were lucky; the blast hit the wall where we had



been standing. I told Bowden to stay down and dashed low behind the workbench, trying to put some distance between myself and our assailant. When I reached the other side of the room I looked up and saw a man dressed in a black greatcoat holding a pump-action shotgun. He spotted me and I ducked as a blast from the shotgun scattered plaster fragments of Shakespeare all over me. The concussion of the shot had started up a mannequin of Romeo, who intoned pleadingly: *He jests at scars, that never felt a wound. But soft! What light through yonder . . .* until a second shot from the shotgun silenced him. I looked across at Bowden, who shook the plaster out of his hair and drew his revolver. I ran across to the far wall, ducking as our assailant fired again, once more shattering Archer's carefully painted plaster statues. I heard Bowden's revolver crack twice. I stood up and fired at our attacker, who had secreted himself in an office; my shots did nothing except splinter the wood on the door frame. Bowden fired again and his shot ricocheted off a cast-iron spiral staircase and hit a Will-Speak machine of Lord and Lady Macbeth; they started whispering to one another about the wisdom of murdering the king. I caught a glimpse of the man running across the room to outflank us. I had a clear view of him when he stopped, but as he did so Sturme Archer stood up between us, blocking my shot. I couldn't believe it.

"Felix7!" cried Archer desperately. "You must help me! Dr. Muller said--"

Archer, sadly, had mistaken Felix7's intentions but had little time to regret them as our assailant dispatched him swiftly at close range, then turned to make his escape. Bowden and I must have opened fire at once; Felix7 managed three paces before stumbling under the shots and falling heavily against some packing cases.

"Bowden!" I yelled. "You okay?"

He answered slightly unsteadily but in the affirmative. I advanced slowly on the fallen figure, who was breathing in short gasps, all the time watching me with a disconcertingly calm face. I kicked away the shotgun then ran a hand down his coat while holding my gun a few inches from his head. I found an automatic in a shoulder holster and a Walther PPK in an inside pocket. There was a twelve-inch knife and a baby Derringer in his other pockets. Bowden arrived at my side.

"Archer?" I asked.

"Finished."

"He knew this clown. He called him Felix7. Mentioned something about a Dr. Muller, too."

Felix7 smiled up at me as I took out his wallet.

"James Crometty!" demanded Bowden. "Did you kill him?"

"I kill a lot of people," whispered Felix7. "I don't remember names."

"You shot him six times in the face."

The dying killer smiled.

"*That* I remember."

"Six times! Why?"

Felix7 frowned and started to shiver.

"Six was all I had," he answered simply.

Bowden pulled the trigger of his revolver two inches from Felix7's face. It was lucky for Bowden that the hammer fell harmlessly on the back of a spent cartridge. He threw the gun aside, picked up the dying man by the lapels and shook him.

"WHO ARE YOU?" he demanded.

"I don't even know myself," said Felix7 placidly. "I was married once, I think; and I had a blue car. There was an apple tree in the house where I grew up and I think I had a brother named Tom. The memories are vague and indistinct. I fear nothing because I value nothing. Archer is dead. My job is done. I have served my master; nothing else is of any consequence."

He managed a wan smile.

"Hades was right."

"About what?"

"About *you*, Miss Next. You're a worthy adversary."

"Die easy," I told him. "Where is Hades?"

He smiled for the last time and shook his head slowly. I had been trying to plug his wounds as he lay dying, but it was no good. His breathing became more labored and finally stopped altogether.

"*Shit!*"

"That's *Mr.* Schitt to you, Next!" said a voice behind us. We turned to see my second-least favorite person and two of his minders. He didn't look in a terribly good mood. I surreptitiously pushed Felix7's wallet under a workbench with my foot and stood up.

"Move to the side."

We did as we were told. One of Schitt's men reached down and felt Felix7's pulse. He looked up at Schitt and shook his head.

"Any ID?"

The minder started to search him.

"You've really screwed things up here, Next," said Schitt with barely concealed fury. "The only lead I've got is flatline. When I've finished with you, you'll be lucky to get a job setting cones on the M4."

I put two and two together.

"You *knew* we were in here, didn't you?"

He glared at me.

"That man could have taken us to the ringleader and *he* has something that we want," asserted Schitt.

"Hades?"

"Hades is dead, Miss Next."

"Horseshit, Schitt. You know as well as I do that Hades is alive and well. What Hades has belongs to my uncle. And if I know my uncle, he would sooner destroy it forever than sell out to Goliath."

"Goliath doesn't buy, Next. They *appropriate*. If your uncle has developed a machine that can help in the defense of his country, then it is his duty to share it."

"Is it worth the life of two officers?"

"Most certainly. SpecOps officers die pointlessly every day. If we can, we should try our best to make those deaths worthwhile."

"If Mycroft dies through your negligence, I swear to God!--"

Jack Schitt was unimpressed.

"You really have no idea who you are talking to, do you, Next?"

"I'm talking to someone whose ambition has throttled his morality."

"Wrong. You're talking to Goliath, a company that has the welfare of England foremost in its heart; everything that you see about you has been given to this country by the benevolence of Goliath. Is it little wonder that the Corporation should expect a small amount of gratitude in return?"

"If Goliath is as selfless as you suggest, Mr. Schitt, then they should expect *nothing* in return."

"Fine words, Miss Next, but cash is always the deciding factor in such matters of moral politics; nothing ever gets done unless motivated by commerce or greed."

I could hear sirens approaching. Schitt and his two minders made a quick exit, leaving us with Felix7 and Archer's bodies. Bowden turned to me.

"I'm glad that he's dead and I'm glad that I'm the one that pulled the trigger. I thought it might be hard but I did not have the slightest hesitation."

He said it as though it were an interesting experience, nothing less; as though he had just been on the roller-coaster at Alton Towers and was describing the experience to a friend.

"Does that sound wrong?" he added.

"No," I assured him. "Not at all. He would have killed until someone stopped him. Don't even think about it."

I reached down and picked up Felix7's wallet. We examined the contents. It contained everything you might expect to find, such as banknotes, stamps, receipts and credit cards--but they were all just plain white paper; the credit cards were simply white plastic with a row of zeros where the numbers usually were.

"Hades has a sense of humor."

"Look at this," said Bowden, pointing at Felix7's fingertips. "Wiped clean by acid. And see here, this scar running down behind the scalp line."

"Yes," I agreed, "it might not even be his face."

There was a screech of tires from downstairs. We put down our weapons and held our badges in the air to avoid any misunderstandings. The officer in charge was a humorless man named Franklin who had heard slightly garbled stories in the canteen about the new Litera Tec.

"You must be Thursday Next. Heard about you. Litera Tec, eh? Kind of a drop from SO-5?"

"At least I made it up there in the first place."

Franklin grunted and looked at the two bodies.

"Dead?"

"Very."

"You lot are becoming quite action-packed. I can't remember the last time a shot was fired in anger by a Litera Tec. Let's not make it a habit, eh? We don't want Swindon turning into a killing field. And if you want a piece of advice, go easy with Jack Schitt. We hear the man's a psychopath."

"Thanks for the tip, Franklin," I said. "I'd never have noticed."

It was after nine when we were finally allowed to leave. Victor had turned up to ask us a few questions out of earshot of the police.

"What the deuce is going on?" he asked. "I've had Braxton yelling on the phone for half an hour; it takes something serious to get him away from his golf club AGM. He wants a full report on the incident on his desk first thing tomorrow morning."

"It was Hades," I said. "Jack Schitt was here with the intention of following one of Acheron's killers after he'd dispatched us both."

Victor looked at me for a moment and was about to comment further when a call came over the wireless from an officer in need of assistance. It was the unmistakable voice of Spike. I went to pick up the microphone but Victor grabbed me by the wrist with a surprising turn of speed. He looked at me grimly.

"No, Thursday. Not with Spike."

"But an officer in need of assistance?--"

"Don't get involved. Spike is on his own and it's best that way."

I looked at Bowden, who nodded agreement and said:

"The powers of darkness are not for everyone, Miss Next. I think Spike understands that. We hear his calls from time to time but I see him in the canteen the following morning, as regular as clockwork. He knows what he's doing."

The wireless was silent; the channel was an open one and perhaps upward of sixty or seventy officers had heard the call. No one had answered.

Spike's voice came over the airwaves again:

"For God's sake, guys!--"

Bowden moved to switch the wireless off but I stopped him. I got into my car and keyed the mike.

"Spike, this is Thursday. Where are you?"

Victor shook his head.

"It was nice knowing you, Miss Next."

I glared at them both and drove off into the night.

Bowden moved across to where Victor was standing.

"Quite a girl," murmured Victor.

"We're going to be married," answered Bowden matter-of-factly.

Victor frowned and looked at him.

"Love is like oxygen, Bowden. When's the happy day?"

"Oh, she doesn't know yet," replied Bowden, sighing. "She is everything a woman should be. Strong and resourceful, loyal and intelligent."

Victor raised an eyebrow.

"When do you suppose you'll ask her?"

Bowden was staring after the taillights of the car.

"I don't know. If Spike is in the sort of trouble that I think he is, perhaps never."

## SpecOps-17: Suckers & Biters

. . . I made the assistance calls as a matter of course; had done since Chesney was pulled to the shadows. Never expected anyone to come; was just my way of saying "Ho, guys! I'm still out here!" Nope, never expected it. Never expected it at all . . .

OFFICER "SPIKE" STOKER

--interview in *Van Helsing's Gazette*

**W**HERE ARE you, Spike?"

There was a pause and then:

"Thursday, think hard before you do this--"

"I have, Spike. Give me your location."

He told me and after a quarter of an hour I pulled up outside the senior school at Haydon.

"I'm here, Spike. What do you need?"

His voice came back on the wireless, but this time slightly strained.

"Lecture room four, and hurry; in the glove box of my black & white you'll find a medical kit--"

There was a yell and he stopped transmitting.

I ran across to where Spike's squad car stood in the dark entrance of the old college. The moon passed behind a cloud and blackness descended; I felt an oppressive hand fall across my heart. I opened the car door and rummaged in the glove box. I found what I was looking for: a small zippered leather case with STOKER embossed on the front in faded gold lettering. I grabbed it and ran up the front steps of the old school. The interior was gloomily lit by emergency lighting; I flicked a panel of switches but the power was out. In the meager light I found a signboard and followed the arrows toward lecture room four. As I ran down the corridor I was aware of a strong odor; it matched the sullen smell of death I had detected in the boot of Spike's car when we had first met. I stopped suddenly, the nape of my neck twitching as a gust of cold wind caught me. I turned around abruptly and froze as I noticed the figure of a man silhouetted against the dim glow of an exit light.

"Spike?" I murmured, my throat dry and my voice cracking.

"I'm afraid not," said the figure, walking softly toward me and playing a torch on my face. "It's Frampton; I'm the janitor. What are you doing here?"

"Thursday Next, SpecOps. There's an officer in need of assistance in

lecture room four."

"Really?" said the janitor. "Probably followed some kids in. Well, you'd better come with me."

I looked at him carefully; a glint from one of the exit lights caught the metallic gold of a crucifix around his throat. I breathed a sigh of relief.

He walked swiftly down the corridor; I followed closely.

"This place is so old it's embarrassing," muttered Frampton, leading me down a second corridor off the first. "Who did you say you were looking for?"

"An officer named Stoker."

"What does he do?"

"He looks for vampires."

"Really? Last infestation we had was in '78. Student by the name of Parkes. Went backpacking in the Forest of Dean and came back a changed man."

"Backpacking in the Forest of Dean?" I repeated incredulously, "Whatever possessed him to do that?"

The janitor laughed. "Good choice of words. Symonds Yat wasn't as secure then as it is now; we've taken precautions too. The whole college was consecrated as a church."

He flashed his torch at a large crucifix on the wall.

"We won't have *that* sort of problem here again. This is it, lecture room four."

He pushed open the door and we entered the large room. Frampton's torch flicked across the oak-paneled walls but a quick search revealed nothing of Spike.

"Are you sure he said number four?"

"Certain," I replied. "He--"

There was a sound of breaking glass and a muffled curse a small way distant.

"What was that?"

"Probably rats," said Frampton.

"And the swearing?"

"*Uncultured* rats. Come, let's--"

But I had moved off to a doorway beyond the lecture room, taking Frampton's torch with me. I pushed the door open wide and an appalling stench of formaldehyde greeted me. The room was an anatomy lab, dark except for the moonlight coming in through the window. Against the wall were rack upon rack of pickled specimens: mostly animal parts, but a few human parts too, things for the boys to frighten the girls with during sixth-form biology lessons. There was the sound of a jar smashing, and I flicked the torch across to the other side of the room. My heart froze. Spike, his self-control having

apparently abandoned him, had just thrown a specimen jar to the floor and was now scrabbling in the mess. Around his feet were the smashed remnants of many jars; it had obviously been quite a feast.

"What are you doing?" I asked, the revulsion rising in my throat.

Spike turned to me, his eyes gaping, his mouth cut from the glass, a look of horror and fear in his eyes.

"I was hungry!" he howled. "And I couldn't find any mice!--"

He closed his eyes for a moment, gathered his thoughts with a Herculean effort, then stammered:

"My medication!--"

I forced down a foul gagging sensation and opened the medical kit to reveal a retractable penlike syringe. I unclipped the pen and moved toward Spike, who had collapsed in a heap and was sobbing silently. There was a hand on my shoulder, and I whirled round. It was Frampton, and he had an unpleasant smile on his lips.

"Let him carry on. He's happier this way, believe me."

I pushed his hand off my shoulder and for an instant my flesh touched his. It was icy cold and I felt a shiver run through me. I backed away hastily and tripped over a stool, falling heavily and dropping Spike's injector. I drew my gun and pointed it at Frampton, who seemed to be gliding toward me without walking. I didn't shout a warning; I just pulled the trigger and a bright flash illuminated the lab. Frampton was catapulted across the floor toward the blackboard and fell in a heap. I scrabbled around for the injector, found it and ran toward Spike, who had picked up a particularly large jar with a very recognizable and unspeakably unpleasant specimen in it. I flashed the torch into his frightened eyes and he mumbled:

"Help me!"

I pulled the cap off the injector and jabbed it in his leg, giving him two clicks. I took the jar from him and he sat down looking confused.

"Spike? Say something."

"That *really* hurt."

But it wasn't Spike talking. It was Frampton. He had picked himself up from the floor and was tying what looked like a lobster bib around his neck.

"Time for dinner, Miss Next. I won't trouble you with the menu because . . . well, *you're it!*"

The door of the biology lab slammed shut and I looked at my gun; it was now about as much use as a water pistol.

I got up and backed away from Frampton, who once more seemed to glide toward me. I fired again but Frampton was ready for it; he simply winced and continued.

"But the crucifix!--" I shouted, backing toward the wall. "And this college--it's a church!"



"Little fool!" replied Frampton. "Do you really suppose that Christianity has a monopoly on people like me?"

I looked around desperately for some kind of weapon, but apart from a chair--which drew out of my grasp as I reached for it--there was nothing.

"*Thoon* be over." Frampton grinned. He had sprouted an inordinately long single front tooth which grew over his bottom lip and gave him a lisp.

"Thoon you will be joining Thpike for a little thnack. *After* I have finithed!"

He smiled and opened his mouth wider; impossibly so--it seemed almost to fill the room. Quite suddenly Frampton stopped, looked confused and rolled his eyes up into his sockets. He grew gray, then black, then seemed to slough away like burned pages in a book. There was a musty smell of decay that almost blotted out the reek of formaldehyde, and soon there was nothing at all except Spike, who was still holding the sharpened stake that had so quickly destroyed the abomination that had been Frampton.

"You okay?" he asked with a triumphant look on his face.

"I'm good," I replied shakily. "Yuh, I feel okay. Well, now I do, anyway."

He lowered the stake and drew me up a chair as the lights flickered back on.

"Thanks for that," I murmured. "My blood is my own and I aim to keep it that way. I guess I owe you."

"No way, Thursday. *I owe you*. No one's ever answered a call of mine before. The symptoms came on as I was sniffing out Fang here. Couldn't get to my injector in time . . ."

His voice trailed off as he looked forlornly at the broken glass and spilled formaldehyde.

"They'll not believe this report," I murmured.

"They don't even *read* my reports, Thursday. Last person who did is now in therapy. So they just file 'em and forget 'em. Like me, I guess. It's a lonely life."

I hugged him on an impulse. It seemed the right thing to do. He returned it gratefully; I didn't expect that he had touched another human for a while. He had a musty smell about him-- but it wasn't unpleasant; it was like damp earth after a spring rain shower. He was muscular and at least a foot taller than me, and as we stood in each other's arms I suddenly felt as though I really wouldn't mind if he made a move on me. Perhaps it was the closeness of the experience that we had just shared; I don't know--I don't usually act in this manner. I moved my hand up his back and onto his neck, but I had misjudged the man and the occasion. He slowly let me go and smiled,

shaking his head softly. The moment had passed.

I paused for a second and then holstered my automatic carefully.

"What about Frampton?"

"He was good," admitted Spike, "*real* good. Didn't feed on his own turf and was never greedy; just enough to sate his thirst."

We walked out of the lab and back down the corridor.

"So how did you get onto him?" I asked.

"Luck. He was behind me in his motor at the lights. Looked in the rearview mirror--empty car. Followed him and *pow*; I knew he was a sucker soon as he spoke. I would have staked him earlier 'cept for my trouble."

We stopped at his squad car.

"And what about you? Any chance of a cure?"

"Top virologists are doing their stuff but for the moment I just keep my injector handy and stay out of the sunlight."

He stopped, took out his automatic and pulled the slide back, ejecting a single shiny bullet.

"Silver," he explained as he gave it to me. "I never use anything else." He looked up at the clouds. They were colored orange by the street lamps and moved rapidly across the sky. "There's weird shit about; take it for luck."

"I'm beginning to think there's no such thing."

"My point precisely. God keep you, Thursday, and thanks once again."

I took the shiny bullet and started to say something but he was gone already, rummaging in the boot of his squad car for a vacuum cleaner and a bin-liner. For him, the night was far from over.

## 18.

### Landen Again

When I first heard that Thursday was back in Swindon I was delighted. I never fully believed that she had gone for good. I had heard of her problems in London and I also knew how she reacted to stress. All of us who returned from the peninsula were to become experts on the subject whether we liked it or not . . .

LANDEN PARKE-LAINE

--*Memoirs of a Crimean Veteran*

I TOLD Mr. Parke-Laine that you had hemorrhagic fever but he didn't believe me," said Liz on reception at the Finis.

"The flu would have been more believable."

Liz was unrepentant.

"He sent you this."

She passed across an envelope. I was tempted just to throw it in the bin, but I felt slightly guilty about giving him a hard time when we had met the previous night. The envelope contained a numbered ticket for *Richard III* which played every Friday evening at the Ritz Theater. We used to attend almost every week when we were going out together. It was a good show; the audience made it even better.

"When did you last go out with him?" asked Liz, sensing my indecision.

I looked up.

"Ten years ago."

"Ten years? Go, darling. Most of my boyfriends would have trouble even remembering that long."

I looked at the ticket again. The show began in an hour.

"Is that why you left Swindon?" asked Liz, keen to be of some help.

I nodded.

"And did you keep a photo of him all those years?"

I nodded again.

"I see," replied Liz thoughtfully. "I'll call a cab while you go and change."

It was good advice, and I trotted off to my room, had a quick shower and tried on almost everything in my wardrobe. I put my hair up, then down again, then up once more, muttered "Too boyish" at a pair of trousers and slipped into a dress. I selected some earrings that Landen had given me and locked my automatic in the room safe. I just had time to put on a small amount of eyeliner before I was whisked

through the streets of Swindon by a taxi driver, an ex-Marine involved in the retaking of Balaclava in '61. We chatted about the Crimea. He didn't know where Colonel Phelps was going to talk either, but when he found out, he said, he would heckle for all his worth.

The Ritz looked a good deal shabbier. I doubted whether it had been repainted at all since we were last here. The gold-painted plaster moldings around the stage were dusty and unwashed, the curtain stained with the rainwater that had leaked in. No other play but *Richard III* had been performed here for over fifteen years, and the theater itself had no company to speak of, just a backstage crew and a prompter. All the actors were pulled from an audience who had been to the play so many times they knew it back to front. Casting was usually done only half an hour before curtain-up.

Occasionally seasoned actors and actresses would make guest appearances, although never by advance booking. If they were at a loose end late Friday night, perhaps after their performance at one of Swindon's three other theaters, they might come along and be selected by the manager as an impromptu treat for audience and cast. Just the week before, a local *Richard III* had found himself playing opposite Lola Vavoom, currently starring in the musical stage version of *Fancy-free in Ludlow* at the Swindon Crucible. It had been something of a treat for him; he didn't need to buy dinner for a month.

Landen was waiting for me outside the theater. It was five minutes to curtain-up and the actors had already been chosen by the manager, plus one in reserve in case anybody had a bad attack of the nerves and started chucking up in the bathroom.

"Thanks for coming," said Landen.

"Yeah," I replied, kissing him on the cheek and taking a deep breath of his aftershave. It was Bodmin; I recognized the earthy scent.

"How was your first day?" he asked.

"Kidnappings, vampires, shot dead a suspect, lost a witness to a gunman, Goliath tried to have me killed, puncture on the car. Usual shit."

"A puncture? Really?"

"Not really. I made that bit up. Listen, I'm sorry about yesterday. I think I'm taking my work a bit too seriously."

"If you weren't," agreed Landen with an understanding smile, "I'd really start worrying. Come on, it's nearly curtain-up."

He took my arm in a familiar gesture that I liked and led me inside. The theatergoers were chattering noisily, the brightly colored costumes of the unchosen actors in the audience giving a gala flavor to the occasion. I felt the electricity in the air and realized how much I had missed it. We found our seats.

"When was the last time you were here?" I asked when we were comfortable.

"With you," replied Landen, standing up and applauding wildly as the curtain opened to a wheezing alarm. I did the same.

A compe re in a black cloak with red lining swept onto the stage.

"Welcome, all you Will-loving R3 fans, to the Ritz at Swindon, where tonight (drum roll), for your DELECTATION, for your GRATIFICATION, for your EDIFICATION, for your JOLLIFICATION, for your SHAKESPEARIFICATION, we will perform Will's *Richard III*, for the audience, to the audience, BY THE AUDIENCE!"

The crowd cheered and he held up his hands to quieten them.

"But before we start!--Let's give a big hand to Ralph and Thea Swanavon who are attending for their two hundredth time!!"

The crowd applauded wildly as Ralph and Thea walked on. They were dressed as Richard and Lady Anne and bowed and curtsied to the audience, who threw flowers onto the stage.

"Ralph has played Dick the shit twenty-seven times and Creepy Clarence twelve times; Thea has been Lady Anne thirty-one times and Margaret eight times!"

The audience stamped their feet and whistled.

"So to commemorate their bicentennial, they will be playing opposite each other for the first time!"

They respectively bowed and curtsied once more as the audience applauded and the curtains closed, jammed, opened slightly and closed again.

There was a moment's pause and then the curtains reopened, revealing Richard at the side of the stage. He limped up and down the boards, eyeing the audience malevolently past a particularly ugly prosthetic nose.

"Ham!" yelled someone at the back.

Richard opened his mouth to speak and the whole audience erupted in unison:

"*When* is the winter of our discontent?"

"Now," replied Richard with a cruel smile, "is the winter of our discontent . . ."

A cheer went up to the chandeliers high in the ceiling. The play had begun. Landen and I cheered with them. *Richard III* was one of those plays that could repeal the law of diminishing returns; it could be enjoyed over and over again.

". . . made glorious summer by this son of York," continued Richard, limping to the side of the stage. On the word "summer" six hundred people placed sunglasses on and looked up at an imaginary sun.

". . . and all the clouds that lower'd upon our house in the deep bosom of the ocean, buried . . ."

"When were our brows bound?" yelled the audience.

"Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths," continued Richard, ignoring them completely. We must have been to this show thirty times and even now I could feel myself mouthing the words with the actor on the stage.

"... to the lascivious pleasing of a lute..." continued Richard, saying "lute" loudly as several other members of the audience gave alternative suggestions.

"Piano!" shouted out one person near us. "Bagpipes!" said another. Someone at the back, missing the cue entirely, shouted in a high voice "Euphonium!" halfway through the next line and was drowned out when the audience yelled: "Pick a card!" as Richard told them that he "was not shaped for sportive tricks . . ."

Landen looked across at me and smiled. I returned the smile instinctively; I was enjoying myself.

"I that am rudely stamp'd . . ." muttered Richard, as the audience took its cue and stamped the ground with a crash that reverberated around the auditorium.

Landen and I had never wanted to tread the boards ourselves and had never troubled to dress up. The production was the only show at the Ritz; it was empty the rest of the week. Keen amateur thespians and Shakespeare fans would drive from all over the country to participate, and it was never anything but a full house. A few years back a French troupe performed the play in French to rapturous applause; a troupe went to Sauvignon a few months later to repay the gesture.

". . . and that so lamely and unfashionable, that dogs bark at me..."

The audience barked loudly, making a noise like feeding time at the dogs' home. Outside in the alley several cats new to the vicinity momentarily flinched, while more seasoned moggies looked at each other with a knowing smile.

The play went on, the actors doing sterling work and the audience parrying with quips that ranged from the intelligent to the obscure to the downright vulgar. When Clarence explained that the king was convinced that ". . . by the letter 'G' his issue disinherited shall be . . ." the audience yelled out:

"Gloucester begins with G, dummy!"

And when the Lady Anne had Richard on his knees in front of her with his sword at his throat, the audience encouraged her to run him through; and just before one of Richard's nephews, the young Duke of York, alluded to Richard's hump: "Uncle, my brother mocks both you and me; because that I am little, like an ape, he thinks that you should bear me on your shoulders--!!!" the audience yelled out: "Don't mention the hump, kid!," and after he did: "The Tower! The Tower!"

The play was the Garrick cut and lasted only about two and a half hours; at Bosworth field most of the audience ended up on the stage as they helped reenact the battle. Richard, Catesby and Richmond had to finish the play in the aisle as the battle raged about them. A pink pantomime horse appeared on cue when Richard offered to swap his kingdom for just such a beast, and the battle finally ended in the foyer. Richmond then took one of the girls from behind the ice-cream counter as his Elizabeth and continued his final speech from the balcony with the audience below hailing him as the new king of England, the soldiers who had fought on Richard's side proclaiming their new allegiance. The play ended with Richmond saying: "God say Amen!"

"Amen!" said the crowd, amid happy applause. It had been a good show. The cast had done a fine job and fortunately this time no one had been seriously injured during Bosworth. Landen and I filed out quickly and found a table in a cafe across the road. Landen ordered two coffees and we looked at one another.

"You're looking good, Thursday. You've aged better than me."

"Nonsense," I replied. "Look at these lines!--"

"Laughter lines," asserted Landen.

"Nothing's *that* funny."

"Are you here for good?" he asked suddenly.

"I don't know," I answered. I dropped my gaze. I had promised myself I wouldn't feel guilty about leaving, but--

"It depends."

"On?--"

I looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

"--on SpecOps."

The coffee arrived at that point and I smiled brightly.

"So, how have you been?"

"I've been good," he said, then added in a lower tone, "I've been lonely too. Very lonely. I'm not getting any younger, either. How have *you* been?"

I wanted to tell him that I'd been lonely too, but some things can't easily be said. I wanted him to know that I still wasn't happy with what he had done. Forgive and forget is all very well, but no one was going to forgive and forget my brother. Anton's dead name was mud and that was solely down to Landen.

"I've been fine." I thought about it. "I haven't, actually."

"I'm listening."

"I'm having a shitty time right now. I lost two colleagues in London. I'm chasing after a lunatic who most people think is dead, Mycroft and Polly have been kidnapped, Goliath is breathing down my neck and the regional commander at SpecOps might just have my badge. As you

can see, things are just peachy."

"Compared to the Crimea, this is small beer, Thursday. You're stronger than all this crap."

Landen stirred three sugars into his coffee and I looked at him again.

"Are you hoping for us to get back together?"

He was taken aback by the directness of my question. He shrugged.

"I don't think we were ever truly apart."

I knew exactly what he meant. Spiritually, we never were.

"I can't apologize anymore, Thursday. You lost a brother, I lost some good friends, my whole platoon and a leg. I know what Anton means to you but I saw him pointing up the wrong valley to Colonel Frobisher just before the armored column moved off. It was a crazy day and crazy circumstances, but it happened and I had to say what I saw!--"

I looked him squarely in the eye.

"Before going to the Crimea I thought that death was the worst thing that could happen to anyone. I soon realized it was only for starters. Anton died; I can accept that. People get killed in war; it's inevitable. Okay, so it was a military debacle of staggering proportions. They also happen from time to time. It's happened many times before in the Crimea."

"Thursday!" implored Landen. "What I said. It was the truth!"

I rounded on him angrily.

"Who can say what the truth was? The truth is whatever we are most comfortable with. The dust, the heat, the noise! Whatever happened that day, the truth is now what everyone reads in the history books. What *you* told the military inquiry! Anton may have made a mistake, but he wasn't the only one that day."

"I saw him point down the wrong valley, Thursday."

"He would never have made that mistake!"

I felt an anger I hadn't felt for ten years. Anton had been blamed for the charge, it was as simple as that. The military leaders managed to squirm out of their responsibilities once again and my brother's name had entered the national memory and the history books as that of the man who lost the Light Armored Brigade. The commanding officer and Anton had both died in the charge. It had been up to Landen to tell the story.

I got up.

"Walking out again, Thursday?" said Landen sardonically. "Is this how it will always be? I was hoping you would have mellowed, that we could have made something out of this mess, that there was still enough love in us to make it work."

I shot a furious look at him.



"What about loyalty, Landen? He was your greatest friend!"

"And I *still* said what I said," sighed Landen. "One day you'll have to come to terms with the fact that Anton fucked up. It happens, Thursday. It happens."

I stared at him and he stared back.

"Can we *ever* get over this, Thursday? I need to know as a matter of some urgency."

"Urgency? What urgency? No," I replied, "no, no, we can't. I'm sorry to have wasted your fucking precious time!"

I ran out of the cafe, eyes streaming and angry with myself, angry with Landen and angry with Anton. I thought about Snood and Tamworth. We should all have waited for backup; Tamworth and I fucked up by going in and Snood fucked up by taking on an enemy which he knew he was not physically or mentally prepared to face. We had all been flushed with excitement by the chase; it was the sort of impetuous action that Anton would have taken. I had felt it once before in the Crimea and I had hated myself for it then too.

I got back to the Finis at about one in the morning. The John Milton weekend was ending with a disco. I took the lift up to my room, the distorted beat of the music softening to a dull thud as I was transported upward. I leaned against the mirror in the lift and took solace in the coolness of the glass. I should never have come back to Swindon, that much was obvious. I would speak to Victor in the morning and transfer out as soon as possible.

I opened my room door and kicked off my shoes, lay on the bed and stared at the polystyrene ceiling tiles, trying to come to terms with what I had always suspected but never wanted to face. My brother had fucked up. Nobody had bothered to put it so simply before; the military tribunal spoke of "tactical errors in the heat of the battle" and "gross incompetence." Somehow "fucked up" made it seem more believable; we all make mistakes at some time in our lives, some more than others. It is only when the cost is counted in human lives that people really take notice. If Anton had been a baker and forgotten the yeast, nothing would have been made of it, but he would have fucked up just the same.

As I lay there thinking I slowly drifted into sleep and with sleep came troubled dreams. I was back at Styx's apartment block, only this time I was standing outside the back entrance with the upturned car, Commander Flanker and the rest of the SO-1 interview panel. Snood was there too. He had an ugly hole in his wrinkled forehead and was standing, arms crossed and looking at me as if I had taken his football and he had sought out Flanker for some kind of redress.

"Are you *sure* you didn't tell Snood to go and cover the back?" asked

Flanker.

"Positive," I said, looking at them both in turn.

"She did, you know," said Acheron as he walked past. "I heard her."

Flanker stopped him.

"Did you? What *exactly* did she say?"

Acheron smiled at me and then nodded at Snood, who returned his greeting.

"Wait!" I interrupted. "How can you believe what he says? The man's a liar!"

Acheron looked offended and Flanker turned to me with a steely gaze.

"We only have *your* word for that, Next."

I could feel myself boil with inner rage at the unfairness of it all. I was just about to cry out and wake up when I felt a tap on my arm. It was a man dressed in a dark coat. He had heavy black hair that fell over his dour, strong features. I knew immediately who he was.

"Mr. Rochester?"

He nodded in return. But now we were no longer outside the warehouses in the East End; we were in a well-furnished hall, lit by the dim glow of oil lamps and the flickering light from a fire in the large hearth.

"Is your arm well, Miss Next?" he asked.

"Very well, thanks," I said, moving my hand and wrist to demonstrate.

"I should not trouble yourself with them," he added, indicating Flanker, Acheron and Snood, who had started to argue in the corner of the room near the bookcase. "They are merely in your dream and thus, being illusory, are of no consequence."

"And what about you?"

Rochester smiled, a forced, gruff smile. He was leaning on the mantelpiece and looked into his glass, swirling his Madeira delicately.

"I was never real to begin with."

He placed the glass on the marble mantel and flipped out a large silver hunter, popped it open, read the time and returned it to his waistcoat pocket in one smooth easy movement.

"Things are becoming more urgent, I can feel it. I trust I can count on your fortitude when the time comes?"

"What do you mean?"

"I can't explain. I don't know how I managed to get here or even how you managed to get to me. You remember when you were a little girl? When you chanced upon us both that chill winter's evening?"

I thought about the incident at Haworth all those years ago when I entered the book of *Jane Eyre* and caused Rochester's horse to slip.

"It was a long time ago."

"Not to me. You remember?"

"I remember."

"Your intervention *improved* the narrative."

"I don't understand."

"Before, I simply bumped into my Jane and we spoke briefly. If you had read the book prior to your visit you would have noticed. When the horse slipped to avoid you it made the meeting more dramatic, wouldn't you agree?"

"But hadn't that happened already?"

Rochester smiled.

"Not at all. But you weren't the first visitor we have had. And you won't be the last, if I'm correct."

"What do you mean?"

He picked up his drink again.

"You are about to rouse from your sleep, Miss Next, so I shall bid you adieu. Again: I can trust in your fortitude when the time comes?"

I didn't have time to answer or question him further. I was woken by my early morning call. I was in my clothes from the previous evening, the light and the television still on.

## 19.

### The Very Irrev. Joffy Next

Dearest Mum,

*Life here in theDELETED BY CENSORScamp is great fun. The weather is good, the food average, the company AOK. ColonelDELETED BY CENSORSis our CO; he is a cracking fellow. I see Thurs quite often & although you told me to look after her I think she can look after herself. She won the battalion ladies' boxing tournament. We move up toDELETED BY CENSORSnext week, I will write again when I have more news.*

*Your son, Anton*

Letter from Anton Next sent two weeks before he died

**A**PART FROM one other person I had the breakfast room all to myself. As fate would have it, that one other person was Colonel Phelps.

"Good morning, Corporal!" he said cheerfully as he spotted me trying to hide behind a copy of *The Owl*.

"Colonel."

He sat down opposite me without asking.

"Good response to my presence here so far, y'know," he said genially, taking some toast and waving a spoon at the waiter. "You there, sir, more coffee. We're having the talk next Sunday; you *are* still coming, I trust?"

"I just *might* be there," I responded, quite truthfully.

"Splendid!" he gushed. "I must confess I thought you'd stumbled off the path when we spoke on the gasbag."

"Where is it being held?"

"A bit hush-hush, old girl. Walls have ears, careless talk, all that rot. I'll send a car for you. Seen this?"

He showed me the front page of *The Mole*. It was, like all the papers, almost exclusively devoted to the upcoming offensive that everyone thought was so likely there didn't seem even the slightest hope that it wouldn't happen. The last major battle had been in '75 and the memories and lessons of that particular mistake didn't seem to have sunk in.

"More *coffee* I said, sir!" roared Phelps to the waiter, who had given him tea by mistake. "This new plasma rifle is going to clinch it, y'know. I've even thought of modifying my talk to include a request for anyone wanting a new life on the peninsula to start filing claims now. I understand from the foreign secretary's office that we will need

settlers to move in as soon as the Russians are evicted for good."

"Don't you understand?" I asked in an exasperated tone. "There won't be an end. Not while we have troops on Russian soil."

"What's that?" murmured Phelps. "Mmm? Eh?"

He fiddled with his hearing aid and cocked his head to one side like a parakeet. I made a noncommittal noise and left as soon as I could.

It was early; the sun had risen but it was still cold. It had rained during the night and the air was heavy with water. I put the roof of the car down in an attempt to blow away the memories of the night before, the anger that had erupted when I realized that I couldn't forgive Landen. It was the dismay that I would always feel the same rather than the dismay over the unpleasant ending to the evening which upset me most. I was thirty-six, and apart from ten months with Filbert I had been alone for the past decade, give or take a drunken tussle or two. Another five years of this and I knew that I would be destined not to share my life with anyone.

The wind tugged at my hair as I drove rapidly along the sweeping roads. There was no traffic to speak of and the car was humming sweetly. Small pockets of fog had formed as the sun rose, and I drove through them as an airship flies through cloud. My foot rolled off the throttle as I entered the small parcels of gloom, then gently pressed down again as I burst free into the morning sun once more.

The village of Wanborough was not more than ten minutes' drive from the Finis Hotel. I parked outside the GSD temple-- once a C of E church--and turned off the engine, the silence of the country a welcome break. In the distance I could hear some farm machinery but it was barely a rhythmical hum; I had never appreciated the peace of the country until I had moved to the city. I opened the gate and entered the well-kept graveyard. I paused for a moment, then ambled at a slow respectful pace past the rows of well-tended graves. I hadn't visited Anton's memorial since the day I left for London, but I knew that he wouldn't have minded. Much that we had appreciated about one another had been left unsaid. In humor, in life and in love, we had understood. When I arrived in Sebastopol to join the 3rd Wessex Tank Light Armored Brigade, Landen and Anton were already good friends. Anton was attached to the brigade as signals captain; Landen was a lieutenant. Anton had introduced us; against strict orders we had fallen in love. I had felt like a schoolgirl, sneaking around the camp for forbidden trysts. In the beginning the Crimea just seemed like a whole barrel of fun.

None of the bodies came home. It was a policy decision. But many

had private memorials. Anton's was near the end of the row, underneath the protective bough of an old yew and sandwiched between two other Crimean memorials. It was well kept up, obviously weeded regularly, and fresh flowers had recently been placed there. I stood by the unsophisticated gray limestone tablet and read the inscription. Simple and neat. His name, rank and the date of the charge. There was another stone not unlike this one sixteen hundred miles away marking his grave on the peninsula. Others hadn't fared so well. Fourteen of my colleagues on the charge that day were still "unaccounted for." It was military jargon for "not enough bits to identify."

Quite suddenly I felt someone slap me on the back of my head. It wasn't hard but enough to make me jump. I turned to find the GSD priest looking at me with a silly grin on his face.

"Wotcha, Doofus!" he bellowed.

"Hello, Joffy," I replied, only slightly bemused. "Want me to break your nose again?"

"I'm cloth now, Sis!" he exclaimed. "You can't go around bashing the clergy!"

I stared at him for a moment.

"Well, if I can't bash you," I told him, "what can I do?"

"We at the GSD are very big on hugs, Sis."

So we hugged, there in front of Anton's memorial, me and my loopy brother Joffy, whom I had never hugged in my life.

"Any news on Brainbox and the Fatarse?" he asked.

"If you mean Mycroft and Polly, no."

"Loosen up, Sis. Mycroft is a Brainbox and Polly, well, she *does* have a fat arse."

"The answer's still no. Mind you, she and Mum have put on a bit of weight, haven't they?"

"A *bit*? I should say. Tesco's should open a superstore just for the pair of them."

"Does the GSD encourage such blatant personal attacks?" I asked.

Joffy shrugged.

"Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't," he answered. "That's the beauty of the Global Standard Deity--it's whatever you want it to be. And besides, you're family so it doesn't count."

I looked around at the well-kept building and graveyard.

"How's it all going?"

"Pretty well, thanks. Good cross section of religions and even a few Neanderthals, which is quite a coup. Mind you, attendances have almost tripled since I converted the vestry into a casino and introduced naked greasy-pole dancing on Tuesdays."

"You're joking!"

"Yes, of course I am, *Doofus*."

"You little shit!" I laughed. "I *am* going to break your nose again!"

"Before you do, do you want a cup of tea?"

I thanked him and we walked toward the vicarage.

"How's your arm?" he asked.

"It's okay," I replied. Then, since I was eager to try to keep up with his irreverence, I added: "I played this joke on the doctor in London. I said to him when he rebuilt the muscles in my arm, 'Do you think I'll be able to play the violin?' and he said: 'Of course!' and then I said: 'That's good, I couldn't before!' "

Joffy stared at me blank-faced.

"SpecOps Christmas parties must be a riot, Sis. You should get out more. That's probably the worst joke I've ever heard."

Joffy could be infuriating at times, but he probably had a point--although I wasn't going to let him know it. So I said instead:

"Bollocks to you, then."

That *did* make him laugh.

"You were always *so* serious, Sis. Ever since you were a little girl. I remember you sitting in the living room staring at the *News at Ten*, soaking in every fact and asking Dad and the Brainbox a million questions--Hello, Mrs. Higgins!"

We had just met an old lady coming through the lichgate carrying a bunch of flowers.

"Hello, Irreverend!" she replied jovially, then looked at me and said in a hoarse whisper: "Is this your girlfriend?"

"No, Gladys--this is my sister, Thursday. She's SpecOps and consequently doesn't have a sense of humor, a boyfriend or a life."

"That's nice, dear," said Mrs. Higgins, who was clearly quite deaf, despite her large ears.

"Hello, Gladys," I said, shaking her by the hand. "Joffy here used to bash the bishop so much when he was a boy we all thought he would go blind."

"Good, good," she muttered.

Joffy, not to be outdone, added: "And little Thursday here made so much noise during sex that we had to put her in the garden shed whenever her boyfriends stayed the night."

I elbowed him in the ribs but Mrs. Higgins didn't notice; she smiled benignly, wished us both a pleasant day, and teetered off into the churchyard. We watched her go.

"A hundred and four next March," murmured Joffy. "Amazing, isn't she? When she goes I'm thinking of having her stuffed and placed in the porch as a hat stand."

"Now I know you're joking."

He smiled.

"I don't have a serious bone in my body, Sis. Come on, I'll make you that tea."

The vicarage was huge. Legend had it that the church's spire would have been ten feet taller had the incumbent vicar not taken a liking to the stone and diverted it to his own residence. An unholy row broke out with the bishop and the vicar was relieved of his duties. The larger-than-usual vicarage, however, remained.

Joffy poured some strong tea out of a Clarice Cliff teapot into a matching cup and saucer. He wasn't trying to impress; the GSD had almost no money and he couldn't afford to use anything other than what came with the vicarage.

"So," said Joffy, placing a teacup in front of me and sitting down on the sofa, "do you think Dad's boffing Emma Hamilton?"

"He never mentioned it. Mind you, if you were having an affair with someone who died over a hundred years ago, would you tell your wife?"

"How about me?"

"How about you what?"

"Does he ever mention me?"

I shook my head and Joffy was silent in thought for a moment, which is unusual for him.

"I think he wanted me to be in that charge in Ant's place, Sis. Ant was always the favored son."

"That's stupid, Joffy. And even if it were true--which it isn't--there's nothing anyone can do about it. Ant is gone, finished, dead. Even if you *had* stayed out there, let's face it, army chaplains don't exactly dictate military policy."

"Then why doesn't Dad ever come and see me?"

I shrugged.

"I don't know. Perhaps it's a ChronoGuard thing. He rarely visits me unless on business--and never for more than a couple of minutes."

Joffy nodded then asked:

"Have you been attending church in London, Sis?"

"I don't really have the time, Joff."

"We *make* time, Sis."

I sighed. He was right.

"After the charge I kind of lost my faith. SpecOps have chaplains of their own but I just never felt the same about anything."

"The Crimea took a lot away from all of us," said Joffy quietly. "Perhaps that is why we have to work twice as hard to hang onto what we have left. Even I was not immune to the passion of the battle. When I first went to the peninsula I was excited by the war--I could feel the insidious hand of nationalism holding me upright and smothering my reason. When I was out there I *wanted* us to win, to kill



the foe. I reveled in the glory of battle and the camaraderie that only conflict can create. No bond is stronger than that welded in conflict; no greater friend is there than the one who stood next to you as you fought."

Joffy suddenly seemed that much more human; I presumed this was the side of him his parishioners saw.

"It was only afterward that I realized the error of what we were doing. Pretty soon I could see no difference between Russian and English, French or Turk. I spoke out and was banned from the frontline in case I sowed disharmony. My bishop told me that it was not my place to judge the errors of the conflict, but to look after the spiritual well-being of the men and women."

"So that's why you returned to England?"

"That's why I returned to England."

"You're wrong, you know," I told him.

"About what?"

"About not having a serious bone in your body. Did you know Colonel Phelps was in town?"

"I did. What an arse. Someone should poison him. I'm speaking opposite him as 'the voice of moderation.' Will you join me at the podium?"

"I don't know, Joff, really I don't."

I stared at my tea and refused a chocolate biscuit that he offered me.

"Mum keeps the memorial well, doesn't she?" I said, desperate to change the subject.

"Oh, it's not her, Doofus. She couldn't bear to even walk past the stone--even if she did slim down enough to get through the lich-gate."

"Who, then?"

"Why, *Landen*, of course. Did he not tell you?"

I sat up.

"No. No, he didn't."

"He might write crap books and be a bit of a dork, but he was a good friend to Anton."

"But his testimony damned him forever!--"

Joffy put his tea down and leaned forward, lowered his voice to a whisper and placed his hand on mine.

"Sister dearest, I know this is an old cliché but it's true: *The first casualty of war is always truth*. Landen was trying to redress that. Don't think that he didn't agonize long and hard over it-- it would have been easier to lie and clear Ant's name. But a small lie always breeds a bigger one. The military can ill afford more than it has already. Landen knew that and so too, I think, did our Anton."

I looked up at him thoughtfully. I wasn't sure what I was going to

say to Landen but I hoped I would think of something. He had asked me to marry him ten years ago, just before his evidence at the tribunal. I had accused him of attempting to gain my hand by stealth, knowing what my reaction would be following the hearing. I had left for London within the week.

"I think I'd better call him."

Joffy smiled.

"Yes, perhaps you'd better--*Doofus*."

## 20.

### Dr. Runcible Spoon

... Several people have asked me where I find the large quantity of prepositions that I need to keep my Bookworms fit and well. The answer is, of course, that I use *omitted* prepositions, of which, when mixed with dropped definite articles, make a nourishing food. There are a superabundance of these in the English language. *Journey's end*, for instance, has one omitted preposition and two definite articles: **theendof thejourney**. There are many other examples, too, such as *bedside* (**thesideof thebed**) and *streetcorner* (**thecornerof thestreet**), and so forth. If I run short I head to my local newspapers, where omitted prepositions can be found in *The Toad's* headlines every day. As for the worm's waste products, these are chiefly composed of apostrophes--something that is becoming a problem--I saw a notice yesterday that read: *Cauliflower's, three shilling's each* . . .

MYCROFT NEXT,  
writing in the "Any Questions?"  
page of *New Splicer* magazine

**B**OWDEN AND Victor were out when I arrived at the office; I poured myself some coffee and sat down at my desk. I called Landen's number but it was engaged; I tried a few minutes later but without any luck. Sergeant Ross called from the front desk and said that he was sending someone up who wanted to see a Litera Tec. I twiddled my thumbs for a bit, and had failed to reach Landen a third time when a small, academic-looking man with an overpowering aura of untidiness shambled into the office. He wore a small bowler hat and a herringbone-pattern shooting jacket pulled hastily over what looked like his pajama top. His briefcase had papers protruding from where he had caught them in the lid and the laces of both his shoes were tied in reef knots. He stared up at me. It was a two-minute walk from the front desk and he was still fumbling with his visitor's pass.

"Allow me," I said.

The academic stood impassively as I clipped his pass on and then thanked me absently, looking around as he tried to determine where he was.

"You're looking for me and you're on the right floor," I said, glad that I had had plenty of experience of academics in the past.

"I am?" he said with great surprise, as though he had long ago accepted that he would always end up in the wrong place.

"Special Operative Thursday Next," I said, holding out a hand for him to shake. He shook it weakly and tried to raise his hat with the hand that was holding the briefcase. He gave up and tipped his head instead.

"Er . . . thank you, Miss Next. My name is Dr. Runcible Spoon, Professor of English Literature at Swindon University. I expect you've heard of me?"

"I'm sure it was only a matter of time, Dr. Spoon. Would you care to sit down?"

Dr. Spoon thanked me and followed me across to my desk, pausing every now and then as a rare book caught his eye. I had to stop and wait a number of times before I had him safely ensconced in Bowden's chair. I fetched him a cup of coffee.

"So, how can I be of assistance, Dr. Spoon?"

"Perhaps I should show you, Miss Next."

Spoon rummaged through his case for a minute, taking out some unmarked students' work and a paisley-patterned sock before finally finding and handing me a heavy blue-bound volume.

"*Martin Chuzzlewit*," explained Dr. Spoon, pushing all the papers back into his case and wondering why they had expanded since he took them out.

"Chapter nine, page one eighty-seven. It is marked."

I turned to where Spoon had left his bus pass and scanned the page.

"See what I mean?"

"I'm sorry, Dr. Spoon. I haven't read *Chuzzlewit* since I was in my teens. You're going to have to enlighten me."

Spoon looked at me suspiciously, wondering if I was, perhaps, an impostor.

"A student pointed it out to me early this morning. I came out as quickly as I could. On the bottom of page one eighty-seven there was a short paragraph outlining one of the curious characters who frequent Todger's, the boarding house. A certain Mr. Quaverley by name. He is an amusing character who only converses on subjects that he knows nothing about. If you scan the lines I think you will agree with me that he has vanished."

I read the page with growing consternation. The name of Quaverley did ring a bell, but of his short paragraph there appeared to be no sign.

"He doesn't appear later?"

"No, Officer. My student and I have been through it several times. There is no doubt about it. Mr. Quaverley has inexplicably been excised from the book. It is as if he had never been written."

"Could it be a printing error?" I asked with a growing sense of unease.

"On the contrary. I have checked seven different copies and they all read exactly the same. *Mr. Quaverley is no longer with us.*"

"It doesn't seem possible," I murmured.

"I agree."

I felt uneasy about the whole thing, and several links between Hades, Jack Schitt and the *Chuzzlewit* manuscript started to form in unpleasant ways in my mind.

The phone rang. It was Victor. He was at the morgue and requested me to come over straight away; they had discovered a body.

"What's this to do with me?" I asked him.

As Victor spoke I looked over at Dr. Spoon, who was staring at a food stain he had discovered on his tie.

"No, on the contrary," I replied slowly, "considering what has just happened here I don't think that sounds odd at all."

The morgue was an old Victorian building that was badly in need of refurbishment. The interior was musty and smelled of formaldehyde and damp. The employees looked unhealthy and shuffled around the confines of the small building in a funereal manner. The standard joke about Swindon's morgue was that the corpses were the ones with all the charisma. This rule was especially correct when it came to Mr. Rumplunkett, the head pathologist. He was a lugubrious-looking man with heavy jowls and eyebrows like thatch. I found him and Victor in the pathology lab.

Mr. Rumplunkett didn't acknowledge my entrance, but just continued to speak into a microphone hanging from the ceiling, his monotonous voice sounding like a low hum in the tiled room. He had been known to send his transcribers to sleep on quite a few occasions; he even had difficulty staying awake himself when practicing speeches to the forensic pathologists' annual dinner dance.

"I have in front of me a male European aged about forty with gray hair and poor dentition. He is approximately five foot eight inches tall and dressed in an outfit that I would describe as Victorian . . ."

As well as Bowden and Victor there were two homicide detectives present, the ones who had interviewed us the night before. They looked surly and bored and glared at the LiteraTec contingent suspiciously.

"Morning, Thursday," said Victor cheerfully. "Remember the Studebaker belonging to Archer's killer?"

I nodded.

"Well, our friends in Homicide found this body in the trunk."

"Do we have an ID?"

"Not so far. Have a look at this."

He pointed to a stainless-steel tray containing the corpse's possessions. I sorted through the small collection. There was half a pencil, an unpaid bill for starching collars and a letter from his mother dated June 5, 1843.

"Can we speak in private?" I said.

Victor led me into the corridor.

"It's Mr. Quaverley," I explained.

"Who?"

I repeated what Dr. Spoon had told me. Victor did not seem surprised in the least.

"I thought he looked like a book person," he said at length.

"You mean this has happened before?"

"Did you ever read *The Taming of the Shrew*?"

"Of course."

"Well, you know the drunken tinker in the introduction who is made to think he is a lord, and whom they put the play on for?"

"Sure," I replied. "His name was Christopher Sly. He has a few lines at the end of act one and that is the last we hear of him . . ."

My voice trailed off.

"Exactly," said Victor. "Six years ago an uneducated drunk who spoke only Elizabethan English was found wandering in a confused state just outside Warwick. He said that his name was Christopher Sly, demanded a drink and was very keen to see how the play turned out. I managed to question him for half an hour, and in that time he convinced me that he was the genuine article--yet he never came to the realization that he was no longer in his own play."

"Where is he now?"

"Nobody knows. He was taken for questioning by two unspecified SpecOps agents soon after I spoke to him. I tried to find out what happened but you know how secretive SpecOps can be."

I thought about my time up at Haworth when I was a small girl.

"What about the other way?"

Victor looked at me sharply.

"What do you mean?"

"Have you ever heard of anyone jumping in the other direction?"

Victor looked at the floor and rubbed his nose. "That's pretty radical, Thursday."

"But do you think it's possible?"

"Keep this under your hat, Thursday, but I'm beginning to think that it is. The barriers between reality and fiction are softer than we think; a bit like a frozen lake. Hundreds of people can walk across it, but then one evening a thin spot develops and someone falls through; the hole is frozen over by the following morning. Have you read Dickens's *Dombey and Son*?"

"Sure."

"Remember Mr. Glubb?"

"The Brighton fisherman?"

"Correct. *Dombey* was finished in 1848 and was reviewed extensively with a list of characters in 1851. In that review Mr. Glubb

was *not* mentioned."

"An oversight?"

"Perhaps. In 1926 a collector of antiquarian books named Redmond Bulge vanished while reading *Dombey and Son*. The incident was widely reported in the press owing to the fact that his assistant had been convinced he saw Bulge 'melt into smoke.' "

"And Bulge fits Glubb's description?"

"Almost exactly. Bulge specialized in collecting stories about the sea and Glubb specializes in telling tales of precisely that. Even Bulge's name spelled backward reads " 'Eglub,' a close enough approximation to Glubb to make us think he made it up himself." He sighed. "I suppose you think that's incredible?"

"Not at all," I replied, thinking of my own experiences with Rochester, "but are you absolutely sure he *fell* into *Dombey and Son*?"

"What do you mean?"

"He could have made the jump by choice. He might have preferred it--and stayed."

Victor looked at me strangely. He hadn't dared tell anyone about his theories for fear of being ostracized, but here was a respected London Litera Tec nearly half his age going farther than even he had imagined. A thought crossed his mind.

"You've done it, haven't you?"

I looked him straight in the eye. For this we could both be pensioned off.

"Once," I whispered. "When I was a very young girl. I don't think I could do it again. For many years I thought even that was a hallucination."

I was going to go farther and tell him about Rochester jumping back after the shooting at Styx's apartment, but at that moment Bowden put his head into the corridor and asked us to come in.

Mr. Rumlunkett had finished his initial examination.

"One shot through the heart, very clean, very professional. Everything about the body otherwise normal except evidence of rickets in childhood. It's quite rare these days so it shouldn't be difficult to trace, unless of course he spent his youth in another country. Very poor dental work and lice. It's probable he hasn't had a bath for at least a month. There is not a lot I can tell you except his last meal was suet, mutton and ale. There'll be more when the tissue samples come back from the lab."

Victor and I exchanged looks. I was correct. The corpse had to be Mr. Quaverley's. We all left hurriedly; I explained to Bowden who Quaverley was and where he came from.

"I don't get it," said Bowden as we walked toward the car. "How did Hades take Mr. Quaverley out of *every* copy of *Chuzzlewit*?"

"Because he went for the original manuscript," I answered, "for the maximum disruption. All copies anywhere on the planet, in whatever form, originate from that first act of creation. When the original changes, all the others have to change too. If you could go back a hundred million years and change the genetic code of the first mammal, every one of us would be completely different. It amounts to the same thing."

"Okay," said Bowden slowly, "but why is Hades doing this? If it was extortion, why kill Quaverley?"

I shrugged.

"Perhaps it was a warning. Perhaps he has other plans. There are far bigger fish than Mr. Quaverley in *Martin Chuzzlewit*."

"Then why isn't he telling us?"



## 21.

### Hades & Goliath

All my life I have felt destiny tugging at my sleeve. Few of us have any real idea what it is we are here to do and when it is that we are to do it. Every small act has a knock-on consequence that goes on to affect those about us in unseen ways. I was lucky that I had so clear a purpose.

THURSDAY NEXT

--A Life in SpecOps

**B**UT HE was. When we got back a letter was waiting for me at the station. I had hoped it was from Landen but it wasn't. It bore no stamp and had been left on the desk that morning. No one had seen who delivered it.

I called Victor over as soon as I had read it, laying the sheet of paper on my desk to avoid touching it any more than I had to. Victor put his spectacles on and read the note aloud.

*Dear Thursday,*

*When I heard you had joined the LiteraTec staff I almost believed in divine intervention. It seems that we will at last be able to sort out our differences. Mr. Quaverley was just for starters. Martin Chuzzlewit himself is next for the ax unless I get the following: PS10 million in used notes, a Gainsborough, preferably the one with the boy in blue, an eight-week run of Macbeth for my friend Thomas Hobbes at the Old Vic, and I want you to rename a motorway services "LeighDelamare" after the mother of an associate. Signal your readiness by a small ad in the Wednesday edition of the Swindon Globe announcing Angora rabbits for sale and I will give you further instructions.*

Victor sat down.

"It's signed Acheron. Imagine *Martin Chuzzlewit* without Chuzzlewit!" he exclaimed earnestly, running through all the possibilities. "The book would end within a chapter. Can you imagine the other characters sitting around, waiting for a lead character who never appears? It would be like trying to stage *Hamlet* without the prince!"

"So what do we do?" asked Bowden.

"Unless you have a Gainsborough you don't want and ten million in

loose change, we take this to Braxton."

Jack Schitt was in Braxton Hicks's office when we entered. He didn't offer to leave when we told Hicks it was important and Hicks didn't ask him to.

"So what's up?" asked Braxton, glancing at Schitt, who was practicing his putting on the carpet.

"Hades is alive," I told him, staring at Jack Schitt, who raised an eyebrow.

"Goodness!" muttered Schitt in an unconvincing tone. "That is a surprise."

We ignored him.

"Read this," said Victor, handing across Acheron's note in a cellophane wrapper. Braxton read it before passing it to Schitt.

"Place the ad, Officer Next," said Braxton loftily. "You seem to have impressed Acheron enough for him to trust you. I'll speak to my superiors about his demands and you can inform me when he contacts you again."

He stood up to let us know that the interview had ended but I stayed seated.

"What's going on, sir?"

"Classified, Next. We'd like you to make the drop for us but that's the only way you can be involved in the operation. Mr. Schitt has an extremely well-trained squad behind him who will take care of Hades's capture. Good-day."

Still I didn't rise.

"You're going to have to tell me more, sir. My uncle is involved, and if you want me to play ball I'm going to have to know what's happening."

Braxton Hicks looked at me and narrowed his eyes.

"I'm afraid--"

"What the hell," interjected Schitt. "Tell 'em."

Braxton looked at Schitt, who continued to practice his putting.

"*You* may have the honor, Schitt," said Braxton angrily. "It's *your* show after all."

Schitt shrugged and finished the putt. The ball hit its mark and he smiled.

"Over the last hundred years there has been an inexplicable cross-fertilization between works of fiction and reality. We know that Mr. Analogy has been investigating the phenomenon for some time, and we know about Mr. Glubb and several other characters who have crossed into books. We knew of no one to have returned so we considered it a one-way journey. Christopher Sly changed all that for us."

"You have him?" asked Victor.

"No; he went back. Quite of his own accord, although unfortunately because he was so drunk he went back not to Will's version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, but to an uneven rendition in one of the Bad Quartos. Melted into thin air one day while under observation."

He paused for effect and polished his putter with a large red-spotted handkerchief.

"For some time now, the Goliath Advanced Weapons Division has been working on a device that will open a door into a work of fiction. After thirty years of research and untold expenditure, all we have managed to do is synthesize a poor-quality cheddar from volumes one to eight of *The World of Cheese*. We knew that Hades was interested, and there was talk of clandestine experiments here in England. When the *Chuzzlewit* manuscript was stolen and we found that Hades had it, I knew we were on the right track. Your uncle's kidnapping suggested that he had perfected the machine and the Quaverley extraction proved it. We'll get Hades, although it's the machine that we really want."

"You forget," I said slowly, "that the machine does not belong to you; knowing my uncle he'd destroy the idea forever rather than sell out to the military."

"We know all about Mycroft, Miss Next. He will learn that such a quantum leap in scientific thought should not be the property of a man who is incapable of understanding the true potential of his device. The technology belongs to the nation."

"You're wrong," I said obstinately, getting up to leave. "About as wrong as you can possibly be. Mycroft destroys any machine that he believes might have devastating military potential; if only scientists stopped to think about the possible effects of their discoveries, the planet would be a much safer place for all of us."

Schitt clapped his hands slowly.

"Brave speech but spare me the moralizing, Next. If you want your fridge-freezer and your car and a nice house and asphalt on the roads and a health service, then thank the weapons business. Thank the war economy that drives us to this and thank Goliath. The Crimea is good, Thursday--good for England and especially good for the economy. You deride the weapons business but without it we'd be a tenth-rate country struggling to maintain a standard of living anywhere near that of our European neighbors. Would you prefer that?"

"At least our conscience would be clear."

"Naive, Next, very naive."

Schitt returned to his golf and Braxton took up the explanation:

"Officer Next, we are extending all possible support to the Goliath Corporation in these matters. We want you to help us capture Hades.

You know him from your college days and he addressed this to you. We'll agree to his demands and arrange a drop. Then we tail him and arrest him. Simple. Goliath gets the Prose Portal, we get the manuscript, your uncle and aunt are freed, and SpecOps-5 gets Hades. Everyone gets something so everyone is happy. So for now, we sit tight and wait for news of the drop."

"I know the rules on giving in to extortionists as well as you do, sir. Hades is not one to try and fool."

"It won't come to that," replied Hicks. "We'll give him the money and nab him long before he gets away. I have complete confidence in Schitt's operatives."

"With every respect, sir, Acheron is smarter and tougher than you can possibly imagine. We should do this on our own. We don't need Schitt's hired guns blasting off in all directions."

"Permission denied, Next. You'll do as I tell you, or you'll do nothing. I think that's all."

I should have been more angry but I wasn't. There had been no surprises--Goliath *never* compromised. And when there are no surprises, it's harder to get riled. We would have to work with what we were given.

When we got back to the office I called Landen again. This time a woman answered; I asked to speak to him.

"He's asleep," she said shortly.

"Can you wake him?" I asked. "It's kind of important."

"No, I can't. Who are you?"

"It's Thursday Next."

The woman gave a small snigger that I didn't like.

"He told me all about you, Thursday."

She said it disdainfully; I took an instant dislike to her.

"Who is this?"

"This is Daisy Mutlar, darling, Landy's *fiancee*."

I leaned back in my chair slowly and closed my eyes. This couldn't be happening. No wonder Landen asked me as a matter of some urgency if I was going to forgive him.

"Changed your mind, have you, sweetheart?" asked Daisy in a mocking tone. "Landen's a good man. He waited nearly ten years for you but I'm afraid now he's in love with me. Perhaps if you're lucky we'll send you some cake, and if you want to send a present, the wedding list is down at Camp Hopson."

I forced down a lump in my throat.

"When's the happy day?"

"For you or for me?" Daisy laughed. "For you, who knows? As for me, darling Landy and I are going to be Mr. and Mrs. Parke-Laine two

weeks on Saturday."

"Let me speak to him," I demanded, my voice rising.

"I *might* tell him you called when he wakes up."

"Do you want me to come around and bang on the door?" I asked, my voice rising further. Bowden looked at me from the other side of the desk with an arched eyebrow.

"Listen here, you stupid bitch," said Daisy in a hushed tone in case Landen heard, "you could have married Landen and you blew it. It's all over. Go and find some geeky Litera Tec or something--from what I've seen all you SpecOps clowns are a bunch of weirdos."

"Now just you listen to--"

"No," snapped Daisy. "*You* listen. If you try anything at all to interfere with my happiness I'll wring your stupid little neck!"

The phone went dead. I quietly returned the receiver to its cradle and took my coat from the back of the chair.

"Where are you going?" asked Bowden.

"The shooting range," I replied, "and I may be some time."

## 22.

### The Waiting Game

To Hades, the loss of every Felix brought back the sadness of the first Felix's death. On that occasion it had been a terrible blow; not only the loss of a trusted friend and colleague in crime, but also the terrible realization that the alien emotions of loss he had felt betrayed his half-human ancestry, something he abhorred. It was little wonder that he and the first Felix had got on so well. Like Hades, Felix was truly debased and amoral. Sadly for Felix, he did not share any of Hades' more demonic attributes and had stopped a bullet in the stomach the day that he and Hades attempted to rob the Goliath Bank at Hartlepool in 1975. Felix accepted his death stoically, urging his friend to "carry on the good work" before Hades quietly put him out of his pain. Out of respect for his friend's memory he removed Felix's face and carried it with him away from the crime scene. Every servant *expropriated* from the public since then had been given the dubious honor not only of being named after Acheron's one true friend, but also of wearing his features.

MILLON DE FLOSS

--*Life after Death for Felix Tabularasa*

**B**OWDEN PLACED the ad in the *Swindon Globe*. It was two days before we all sat down in Victor's office to compare notes.

"We've had seventy-two calls," announced Victor. "Sadly, all inquiries about rabbits."

"You did price them kind of low, Bowden," I put in playfully.

"I am not very conversant in matters concerning rabbits," asserted Bowden loftily. "It seemed a fair price to me."

Victor placed a file on the table. "The police finally got an ID on that guy you shot over at Sturmeys Archer's. He had no fingerprints and you were right about his face, Thursday--it wasn't his own."

"So who was he?"

Victor opened the file.

"He was an accountant from Newbury named Adrian Smarts. Went missing two years ago. No criminal record; not so much as a speeding fine. He was a good person. Family man, churchgoer and enthusiastic charity worker."

"Hades stole his will," I muttered. "The cleanest souls are the easiest to soil. There wasn't much left of Smarts by the time we shot him. What about the face?"

"They're still working on that. It might be harder to identify. According to forensic reports Smarts wasn't the only person to wear that face."

I started.

"So who's to say he'll be the last?"

Victor guessed my concern, picked up the phone and called Hicks. Within twenty minutes an SO-14 squad had surrounded the funeral parlor where Smarts's body had been released to his family. They were too late. The face that Smarts had been wearing for the past two years had been stolen. Security cameras, unsurprisingly, had seen nothing.

The news of Landen's upcoming wedding had hit me pretty badly. I found out later that Daisy Mutlar was someone he met at a book signing over a year earlier. She was pretty and beguiling, apparently, but a bit overweight, I thought. She had no great mind either, or at least, that's what I told myself. Landen had said he wanted a family and I guessed he deserved one. In coming to terms with this I had even begun reacting positively to Bowden's sorry attempts to ask me out to dinner. We didn't have much in common, except for an interest in who *really* wrote Shakespeare's plays. I stared across the desk at him as he studied a small scrap of paper with a disputed signature scrawled upon it. The paper was original and so was the ink. The writing, sadly, was not.

"Go on, then," I said, recalling our last conversation when we were having lunch together, "tell me about Edward De Vere, the Earl of Oxford."

Bowden looked thoughtful for a moment.

"The Earl of Oxford was a writer, we can be sure of that. Meres, a critic of the time, mentioned as much in his *Palladis Tamia* of 1598."

"Could he have written the plays?" I asked.

"He *could* have," replied Bowden. "The trouble is, Meres also goes onto list many of Shakespeare's plays and credits Shakespeare with them. Sadly that places Oxford, like Derby and Bacon, into the front-man theory, according to which we have to believe that Will was just the beard for greater geniuses now hidden from history."

"Is that hard to believe?"

"Perhaps not. The White Queen used to believe six impossible things before breakfast and it didn't seem to do her any harm. The front-man theory is *possible*, but there're a few more things in favor of Oxford as Shakespeare."

There was a pause. The authorship of the plays was something that a lot of people took very seriously, and many fine minds had spent lifetimes on the subject.

"The theory goes that Oxford and a group of courtiers were employed by the court of Queen Elizabeth to produce plays in support of the government. In this there seems some truth."

He opened a book and read from an underlined passage.

" 'A crew of courtly makers, noblemen and Gentlemen, who have

written excellently well, as it would appear if their doings could be found out and made public with the rest, of which number is first that noble Gentleman, the Earl of Oxford.' "

He snapped the book shut.

"Puttenham in 1598. Oxford was given an annual grant of a thousand pounds for just such a purpose, although whether this was for writing the plays or another quite different project it is impossible to tell. There is no *positive* evidence that it was he who actually penned the plays. A few lines of poetry similar to Shakespeare's do survive, but it's not conclusive; neither is the lion shaking a spear on Oxford's coat of arms."

"And he died in 1604," I said.

"Yes, there is that. Front-man theories just don't seem to work. If you think Shakespeare might have been a nobleman anxious to remain anonymous, I should forget it. If someone else *did* write the plays I should be looking at another Elizabethan commoner, a man of quite staggering intellect, daring and charisma."

"Kit Marlowe?" I asked.

"The same."

There was a commotion on the other side of the office. Victor slammed down the phone and beckoned us over.

"That was Schitt; Hades has been in touch. He wants us in Hicks's office in half an hour."



## 23.

### The Drop

I was to make the drop. I'd never held a case containing PS10 million before. In fact, I wasn't then and never have. Jack Schitt, in his arrogance, had assumed he would capture Hades long before he got to look at the money. What a sap. The Gainsborough's paint was barely dry and the English Shakespeare Company weren't playing ball. The only part of Acheron's deal that had been honored was the changing of the motorway services' name. Kington St. Michael was now Leigh Delamare.

THURSDAY NEXT  
--A Life in SpecOps

**B**RAXTON HICKS outlined the plan to us soon after--there was an hour to go until the drop. This was Jack Schitt's way of ensuring that none of us tried to make our own plans. In every way this was a Goliath operation--myself, Bowden and Victor were only there to add credibility in case Hades was watching. The drop was at a redundant railway bridge; the only ways in were by two roads and the disused railway line, which was only passable in a four-by-four. Goliath men were to cover both roads and the railway track. They were ordered to let him in, but not out. It all seemed pretty straightforward--on paper.

The ride out to the disused railway line was uneventful, although the phony Gainsborough took up more room in the Speedster than I had imagined. Schitt's men were well hidden; Bowden and I didn't see a single soul as we drove to the deserted spot.

The bridge was still in good condition, even though it had long since ceased to function. I parked the car a little way off and walked alone to the bridge. The day was fine, and there was barely a sound in the air. I looked over the parapet but couldn't see anything remiss, just the large aggregate bed, slightly undulated where the sleepers had been pulled up all those years ago. Small shrubs grew among the stones, and next to the track was a deserted signal box from where I could just see the top half of a periscope watching me. I assumed it to be one of Schitt's men and looked at my watch. It was time.

The muffled sound of a wireless beeping caught my attention. I cocked my head and tried to figure out where it was coming from.

"I can hear a wireless beeping," I said into my walkie-talkie.

"It's not one of ours," responded Schitt from the control base in a deserted farmhouse a quarter of a mile away. "I suggest you find it."

The wireless was wrapped in plastic and stashed in the branches of

a tree on the other side of the road. It was Hades and it was a bad line--it sounded as though he was in a car somewhere.

"Thursday?"

"Here."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"How are you? I'm sorry I had to do what I did but you know how desperate we psychopaths get."

"Is my uncle okay?"

"In the pink, dear girl. Enjoying himself tremendously; such an intellect, you know, but so *very* vague. With his mind and my drive I could rule the globe instead of resorting to all this banal extortion."

"You can finish it now," I told him. Hades ignored me and carried on:

"Don't try anything heroic, Thursday. As you must have guessed, I have the *Chuzzlewit* manuscript and I'm not afraid to disrupt it."

"Where are you?"

"Tut, tut, Thursday, who do you think you're talking to? We'll discuss terms for your uncle's release just as soon as I have my money. You'll see on the parapet a karabiner attached to a length of wire. Place the money and the Gainsborough on the parapet and clip them on. Once that's done I'll come and pick them up. Until we meet again, Miss Thursday Next!"

I repeated to the others what he had said. They told me to do as I was told.

I placed the Gladstone with the money on the parapet and attached it to the Gainsborough. I walked back to the car, sat on the bonnet and watched Hades' booty intently. Ten minutes went by, then half an hour. I asked Victor for advice but he just told me to stay where I was.

The sun became hotter and the flies buzzed merrily around the hedgerows. I could smell the faint odor of freshly turned hay and hear far off the gentle thrum of traffic. It looked as though Hades was just testing us, a not unusual occurrence in the delicate task of paying ransoms. When the poet writer general was kidnapped five years previously it had taken nine attempts before the ransom was successfully delivered. In the event the PWG was returned unharmed; it turned out that he had engineered the whole thing himself to boost flagging sales of his decidedly lame autobiography.

I got bored and walked up to the parapet again, ignoring Schitt's request to back off. I toyed with the karabiner and absently followed the thin high-tensile cable that had been hidden in the brickwork. I traced its course to the loose soil at the base of the parapet, where it led off the bridge. I pulled it up slowly and found it attached to a bungee cord, coiled like a snake beneath some dried grass. Intrigued, I

traced the bungee back to another length of high-tensile braided cable. This was taped carefully to a telegraph pole and then stretched ten feet above my head in a large double loop to another pole at the far end of the bridge. I frowned as the low growl of an engine made me turn. I couldn't see anything but the engine was definitely coming toward me, and quite quickly. I looked along the gravel bed of the old railway, expecting to see a four-wheel-drive, but there was nothing. The noise of the approaching engine increased dramatically as a light aircraft appeared from behind an embankment, where it had obviously flown in low to avoid detection.

"Plane!" I shouted into my walkie-talkie. "They've got a plane!"

Then the firing began. It was impossible to say who started it, or even where it came from, but in an instant the quiet countryside was filled with the sharp, directionless crackle of small-arms fire. I ducked instinctively as several rounds hit the parapet, throwing up a shower of red brick dust. I pulled out my automatic and released the safety as the plane passed overhead. I recognized it as the sort of high-wing observation plane they used in the Crimea for artillery spotting; the side door had been removed and sitting half out of the plane with one foot on the wing strut was Acheron. He was holding a light machine-gun and was blazing away quite happily at everything he could see. He peppered the dilapidated signal box and the Goliath men returned fire with equal enthusiasm; I could already see several holes open up in the plane's fabric. Behind the plane, swinging in the slipstream, trailed a grapnel hook. As it passed over, the hook caught the wire strung between the telegraph poles and whisked off the Gladstone bag and the painting, the bungee cord taking the initial strain out of the pickup. I jumped up and started to fire at the retreating plane, but it banked steeply away and dived behind the embankment, the bag and the Gainsborough flapping dangerously on the end of the rope. To delay now would definitely mean losing them and maybe the last real chance to catch Hades, so I sprinted to the car and reversed out in a shower of earth and small stones. Bowden clung on grimly and reached for his seat belt.

But the airplane had not quite finished with us. The small craft went into a shallow dive to gain more airspeed then pulled up into a near vertical left bank, the port wingtip scraping through the top of a large beech as the pilot turned back toward us. A Studebaker full of Goliath men had set off after the aircraft but braked violently as the airplane came skidding toward them, the pilot booting full left rudder to allow Acheron a better view of his target. The black car was soon a mass of small bullet holes and it swung into a ditch. I stamped on the brakes as another Studebaker pulled in front of me. It too was peppered by Acheron and careered into a low wall approaching the bridge. The

aircraft flew on over me, the Gainsborough now so low that it banged on the bonnet of my car, the rattle of gunfire now only weakly returned by Schitt's men.

I pressed hard on the accelerator and drove off in pursuit of the aircraft, past the two shattered cars and over the bridge. There was a straight road ahead of us and Hades' plane was laboring against a slight headwind; with a bit of luck we might catch them. At the end of the straight there was a fork and a gated entry to a field straight on. The plane carried straight on. Bowden looked at me nervously.

"Which way?" he yelled.

In answer I pulled out my automatic, aimed it at the gate and fired. The first two shots missed but the next three hit their mark; the hinges shattered and the gate collapsed as I bounced into the field, which happened to be populated by a herd of bemused cows. The plane droned on, and while not exactly gaining on it we did at least seem to be keeping up.

"In pursuit of suspects in airplane heading, er, east, I think," yelled Bowden into the police wireless. An aircraft was the one thing none of us had thought of. Although a police airship was in the area it would be too slow to be able to cut off the plane's escape.

We carried on down a shallow slope, dodging heifers and making for the far end of the field, where a farmer in his Land Rover was just closing the gate. He looked perplexed as he saw the mud-spattered sports car fast approaching him but opened the gate anyway. I yanked the wheel hard over, turned right and slewed broadside down the road with one rear wheel in the ditch before I recovered and accelerated rapidly, now at right angles to where we wanted to go. The next turning on the left was into a farm, so in we went, scattering frightened chickens in all directions as we searched for a way out into the fields beyond. The aircraft was still visible, but detours like this only increased the distance between us.

"Hollycroft farm!" Bowden shouted into the wireless as he tried to keep anyone who might be interested informed of our progress. I found my way past the farmyard and out through the orchard by way of a barbed-wire fence that put five deep horizontal scratches along the paintwork of the car. We drove faster across the grass, bumping heavily over hardened ruts made the previous winter. Twice the car bottomed out, but at last we were making headway. As we pulled up beneath the plane, it abruptly banked left. I did likewise and entered a forest on a logging track. We could just see the aircraft above us through the foliage that flicked and rushed above our heads.

"Thursday!!--"shouted Bowden against the rasp of the engine.

"What?"

"Road."

"Road?"

"Road."

We hit the road at full speed and were lifted off the ground by the camber. The car flew through the air, landed slightly askew and skidded sideways into a bramble thicket. The engine stalled but I quickly restarted it and headed off in the direction taken by the airplane. I accelerated up the road and emerged clear of the forest; the aircraft was ahead of us by only a hundred yards. I pressed the accelerator again and the car surged forward. We turned right into another field and tore across the grass, gaining on the plane, which was still flying into the headwind.

"Thursday!"

"What is it now?"

"We're coming to a river!"

It was true. To left and right of us and not more than half a mile distant, the broad expanse of the Severn blocked our route. Acheron was heading off to Wales and the Marches and there didn't seem to be anything we could do about it.

"Hold the wheel!" I yelled as we drew closer behind and beneath the aircraft. Bowden eyed the approaching riverbank nervously. We were doing almost seventy across the flat grassland, and it wouldn't be long before we passed the point of no return. I took careful aim with both hands and fired into the airplane. It jinked and banked violently. For a moment I thought I had hit the pilot but the plane quickly changed direction; it had merely gone into a dive to gain speed.

I swore, stamped on the brake and pulled the wheel around. The car skittered on the grass and drifted sideways through another fence before sliding down a bank and coming to rest at the water's edge with a front wheel in the river. I jumped out and fired at the retreating aircraft in a futile gesture until my gun was empty, half expecting Acheron to turn about and make a low pass, but he never did. The aircraft, with Hades, a forged Gainsborough and ten million pounds in dud notes, droned away into the distance.

We got out and looked at the damaged car.

"A write-off," murmured Bowden after making a last position report over the wireless. "It won't be long before Hades realizes that the money we have given him is *not* of the highest quality."

I stared at the aircraft, which was now a small dot on the horizon.

"Heading into the Republic?" suggested Bowden.

"Could be," I replied, wondering how we should ever get to him if he took refuge in Wales. Extradition agreements did exist but Anglo-Welsh relations were not good and the Politburo tended to regard any enemy of the English as a friend.

"What now?" asked Bowden.

"I'm not sure," I replied slowly, "but I think that if you've never read *Martin Chuzzlewit* you should do so as soon as possible. I've a feeling that as soon as Acheron finds he's been hoodwinked Martin will be the first for the chop."

Hades' plane vanished into the distance. All was quiet except for the gentle lap of the river. I lay down on the grass and closed my eyes, attempting to get a few moments of peace before we were thrown back into the maelstrom of Goliath, Hades, *Chuzzlewit* and all the rest. It was a calm moment--the eye of the hurricane. But I wasn't thinking about any of them. I was still thinking about Daisy Mutlar. The news about her and Landen was both expected and unexpected at the same time; he might have mentioned it, of course, but then, after a ten-year absence, he was under no obligation to do so. I found myself wondering what it would be like to have children and then wondering what it would be like never to know.

Bowden joined me on the grass. He took a shoe off and emptied out some gravel.

"That post I was talking about in Ohio, you remember?"

"Yes?"

"They confirmed the appointment this morning."

"Terrific! When do you start?"

Bowden looked down.

"I haven't agreed to it yet."

"Why not?"

"Have you ever . . . um . . . been to Ohio?" he asked in an innocent tone of voice.

"No; I've been to New York several times, though."

"It's very beautiful, I am told."

"A lot of America is."

"They are offering me twice Victor's pay."

"Good deal."

"And they said I could bring someone with me."

"Who do you have in mind?"

"You."

I looked at him, and his urgent and hopeful expression said it all. I hadn't thought of him as a permanent boss or partner. I supposed that working with him might be like working under Boswell again. A workaholic who expected much the same from his charges.

"That's a very generous offer, Bowden."

"Then you'll consider it?"

I shrugged.

"I can't think of anything beyond Hades. After living with him all day I had hoped that I would be spared his presence at night, but he is

there too, leering at me in my dreams."

Bowden had had no such dreams, but then he hadn't seen as much of Hades as I had. We both lapsed into silence and stayed that way for an hour, watching the river flow languidly past until the tow truck arrived.

I stretched out in my mother's huge iron bathtub and took a swig from the large G&T I had smuggled in with me. The garage had said they would have been happier to scrap the Speedster, but I told them to get it back on the road *no matter what*, as it still had important work to do. As I was drifting off to sleep in the warm pine-smelling waters there was a knock at the door. It was Landen.

"Holy shit, Landen! Can't a girl have a bath in peace?"

"Sorry, Thurs."

"How did you get into the house?"

"Your mother let me in."

"Did she now. What do you want?"

"Can I come in?"

"No."

"You spoke to Daisy."

"Yes I did. Are you really going to marry that cow?"

"I understand you're angry, Thursday. I didn't want you to find out this way. I was going to tell you myself but you kind of dashed off the last time we were together."

There was an awkward silence. I stared at the taps.

"I'm getting on," said Landen finally. "I'll be forty-one next June and I want a family."

"And Daisy will give you that?"

"Sure; she's a great girl, Thursday. She's not you, of course, but she's a great girl; very . . ."

"Dependable?"

"Solid, perhaps. Not exciting, but *reliable*."

"Do you love her?"

"Of course."

"Then there seems little to talk about. What do you want from me?"

Landen hesitated.

"I just wanted to know that I was making the right decision."

"You said you loved her."

"I do."

"And she will give you the children you want."

"That too."

"Then I think you should marry her."

Landen hesitated slightly.

"So that's okay with you?"

"You don't need my permission."

"That's not what I meant. I just wanted to ask if you think this could all have had some other outcome?"

I placed a flannel over my face and groaned silently. It wasn't something I wanted to deal with right now.

"No. Landen, you *must* marry her. You promised her and besides--" I thought quickly. "--I have a job in Ohio."

"Ohio?"

"As a LiteraTec. One of my colleagues at work offered it to me."

"Who?"

"A guy named Cable. Great fellow he is too."

Landen gave up, sighed, thanked me and promised to send me an invitation. He left the house quietly--when I came downstairs ten minutes later, my mother was still wearing a forlorn "I wish he were my son-in-law" sort of look.



## 24.

### Martin Chuzzlewit Is Reprieved

My chief interest in all the work that I have conducted over the past forty or so years has been concerned with the elasticity of bodies. One tends to think only of substances such as rubber in this category but almost everything one can think of can be bent and stretched. I include, of course, space, time, distance and reality . . .

PROFESSOR MYCROFT NEXT

CROFTY!--"

"Polly!--"

They met at the shores of the lake, next to the swath of daffodils that rocked gently in the warm breeze. The sun shone brightly, throwing a dappled light upon the grassy bank on which they found themselves. All about them the fresh smell of spring lay upon the land, bringing with it a feeling of calm and serenity that hushed the senses and relaxed the soul. A little way down the water's edge an old man in a black cape was seated upon a stone, idly throwing pebbles into the crystal water. It might have been almost perfect, in fact, apart from the presence of Felix8, his face not yet healed, standing on the daffodils and keeping a careful eye on his charges. Worried about Mycroft's commitment to his plan, Acheron had allowed him back into "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" to see his wife.

"Have you been well, my love?" asked Mycroft.

She pointed surreptitiously in the direction of the caped figure.

"I've been fine, although Mr. W over there seems to think that he's God's gift to women. He invited me to join him in a few unpublished works. A few flowery phrases and he thinks I'm his."

"The cad!" exclaimed Mycroft, getting up. "I think I might just punch him on the nose!"

Polly pulled his sleeve and made him sit down. She was flushed and excited at the idea of her septuagenarian husband and Wordsworth getting into a fight over her--it would have been quite a boast at the Women's Federation meeting.

"Well, really!--" said Mycroft. "These poets are terrible philanderers." He paused. "You said no, of course?"

"Well, yes, naturally."

She looked at Mycroft with her sweetest smile, but he had moved on.

"Don't leave 'Daffodils' otherwise I won't know where to find you."

He held her hand and together they looked out across the lake. There was no opposite shore, and the pebbles that Wordsworth flicked into the water popped back out after a moment or two and landed back on the foreshore. Aside from that, the countryside was indistinguishable from reality.

"I did something a bit silly," announced Mycroft quite suddenly, looking down and smoothing the soft grass with his palm.

"How silly?" asked Polly, mindful of the precariousness of the situation.

"I burned the *Chuzzlewit* manuscript."

"You did *what*?"

"I said--"

"I heard. Such an original manuscript is almost beyond value. Whatever made you do a thing like that?"

Mycroft sighed. It was not an action he had taken upon himself lightly.

"Without the original manuscript," he explained, "major disruption of the work is impossible. I told you that maniac removed Mr. Quaverley and had him killed. I didn't think he'd stop there. Who would be next? Mrs. Gamp? Mr. Pecksniff? Martin Chuzzlewit himself? I rather think I might have been doing the world a favor."

"And destroying the manuscript stops this, does it?"

"Of course; no original manuscript, no mass disruption."

She held his hand tightly as a shadow fell across them both.

"Time's up," said Felix8.

I had been right *and* wrong over my predictions regarding Acheron's actions. As Mycroft told me later, Hades had been furious when he discovered that no one had taken him seriously, but Mycroft's action in destroying *Chuzzlewit* simply made him laugh. For a man unused to being hoodwinked, he enjoyed the experience. Instead of tearing him limb from limb as Mycroft had suspected, he merely shook him by the hand.

"Congratulations, Mr. Next." He smiled. "Your act was brave and ingenious. Brave, ingenious but sadly self-defeating. I didn't choose *Chuzzlewit* by chance, you know."

"No?" retorted Mycroft.

"No. I was made to study the book at O-level and really got to hate the smug little shit. All that moralizing and endless harking on about the theme of selfishness. I find *Chuzzlewit* only marginally less tedious than *Our Mutual Friend*. Even if they had paid the ransom I would have killed him anyway and enjoyed the experience tremendously."

He stopped talking, smiled at Mycroft and continued:

"Your intervention has allowed Martin Chuzzlewit to continue his

adventures. Todger's boarding house will not be torched and they can continue their unamusing little lives unperturbed."

"I am glad of that," replied Mycroft.

"Save your sentiments, Mr. Next, I haven't finished. In view of your actions I will have to find an alternative. A book that unlike *Chuzzlewit* has genuine literary merits."

"Not *Great Expectations*?"

Acheron looked at him sadly.

"We're beyond Dickens now, Mr. Next. I would have liked to have gone into *Hamlet* and throttled that insufferably gloomy Dane, or even skipped into *Romeo and Juliet* and snuffed out that little twerp Romeo." He sighed before continuing. "Sadly, none of the Bard's original manuscripts survive." He thought for a moment. "Perhaps the Bennett family could do with some thinning . . ."

"*Pride and Prejudice*!?" yelled Mycroft. "You heartless monster!"

"Flattery will not help you now, Mycroft. *Pride and Prejudice* without Elizabeth or Darcy would be a trifle lame, don't you think? But perhaps not Austen. Why not Trollope? A well-placed nail-bomb in Barchester might be an amusing distraction. I'm sure the loss of Mr. Crawley would cause a few feathers to fly. So you see, my dear Mycroft, saving Mr. Chuzzlewit might have been a very foolish act indeed."

He smiled again and spoke to Felix8.

"My friend, why don't you make some enquiries and find out the extent of original manuscripts and their whereabouts?"

Felix8 looked at Acheron coldly.

"I'm not a clerk, sir. I think Mr. Hobbes would be eminently more suitable for that task."

Acheron frowned. Of all the Felixes only Felix3 had ever contradicted a direct order. The hapless Felix3 was liquidated following a very disappointing performance when he hesitated during a robbery. It had been Acheron's own fault, of course; he had tried to endow Felix3 with slightly more personality at the expense of allowing him a pinch of morality. Ever since then he had given up on the Felixes as anything but loyal servants; Hobbes and Dr. Muller had to be his company these days.

"Hobbes!" shouted Hades at the top of his voice. The unemployed actor scuttled in from the direction of the kitchens holding a large wooden spoon.

"Yes, sire?"

Acheron repeated the order to Hobbes, who bowed and withdrew.

"Felix8!"

"Sir?"

"If it's not too much trouble, lock Mycroft in his room. I dare say we

will have no need of him for a couple of weeks. Give him no water for two days and no food for five. That should be punishment enough for disposing of the manuscript."

Felix8 nodded and removed Mycroft from the hotel's old lounge. He took him out into the lobby and up the broad marble staircase. They were the only ones in the moldering hotel; the large front door was locked and bolted.

Mycroft stopped by the window and looked out. He had once visited the Welsh capital as a guest of the Republic to give a talk on synthesizing oil from coal. He had been put up in this very hotel, met anyone who was anyone and even had a rare audience with the highly revered Brawd Ulyanov, octogenarian leader of the modern Welsh Republic. It would have been nearly thirty years ago, and the low-lying city had not changed much. The signs of heavy industry still dominated the landscape and the odor of ironworks hung in the air. Although many of the mines had closed in recent years, the winding gears had not been removed; they punctuated the landscape like sentinels, rising darkly above the squat slate-roofed houses. Above the city on Morlais Hill the massive limestone statue of John Frost looked down upon the Republic he had founded; there had been talk of moving the capital away from the industrialized South but Merthyr was as much a spiritual center as anything else.

They walked on and presently came to Mycroft's cell, a windowless room with only the barest furniture. As he was locked in and left alone, Mycroft's thoughts turned to that which troubled him most: Polly. He had always thought she was a bit of a flirt but nothing more; and Mr. Wordsworth's continued interest in her caused him no small amount of jealous anxiety.

## 25.

### Time Enough for Contemplation

I hadn't thought that *Chuzzlewit* was a popular book, but I was wrong. Not one of us expected the public outcry and media attention that his murder provoked. Mr. Quaverley's autopsy was a matter of public record; his burial was attended by 150,000 Dickens fans from around the globe. Braxton Hicks told us to say nothing about the Litera Tec involvement, but news soon leaked out.

BOWDEN CABLE,  
speaking to *The Owl* newspaper

COMMANDER BRAXTON HICKS threw the newspaper on the desk in front of us. He paced around for a bit before collapsing heavily into his chair.

"I want to know who told the press," he announced. Jack Schitt was leaning on the window frame and watching us all while smoking a rather small and foul-smelling Turkish cigarette. The headline was unequivocal:

#### CHUZZLEWIT DEATH: SPECOPS BLAMED

It went onto outline specifically how "unnamed sources" within Swindon SpecOps had intimated that a botched ransom payment had been the cause of Quaverley's death. It was arse about face but the basic facts were correct. It had placed Hicks under a lot of pressure and caused him to overspend his precious budget by a phenomenal amount to try to discover Hades' whereabouts. The spotter plane that Bowden and I had pursued had been found a burned-out wreck in a field on the English side of Hay-on-Wye. The Gladstone full of the counterfeit money was close by along with the ersatz Gainsborough. It hadn't fooled Acheron for one second. We were all convinced that Hades was in Wales but even political intervention at the highest level had drawn a blank--the Welsh Home Secretary himself had sworn that they would not knowingly stoop to harbor such a notorious criminal. With no jurisdiction on the Welsh side of the border, our searches had centered around the marches--to no avail.

"If the press found out, it wasn't from us," said Victor. "We have nothing to gain from press coverage and everything to lose." He glanced over at Jack Schitt, who shrugged.

"Don't look at me," said Schitt noncommittally, "I'm just an observer, here at the behest of Goliath."

Braxton got up and paced the room. Bowden, Victor and I watched him in silence. We felt sorry for him; he wasn't a bad man, just weak. The whole affair was a poisoned chalice, and if he wasn't removed by the regional SpecOps commander, Goliath would as likely as not do the job themselves.

"Does anyone have any ideas?"

We all looked at him. We had a few ideas, but nothing that could be said in front of Schitt; since he was so willing to let us be killed that evening at Archer's place, not one of us would have given Goliath so much as the time of day.

"Has Mrs. Delamare been traced?"

"We found her okay," I replied. "She was delighted to discover that she had a motorway services named after her. She hasn't seen her son for five years but is under surveillance in case he tries to make contact."

"Good," murmured Braxton. "What else?"

Victor spoke.

"We understand Felix7 has been replaced. A young man named Danny Chance went missing from Reading; his face was found in a waste basket on the third floor of the multistory. We've distributed the morgue photos of Felix7; they should match the new Felix."

"Are you sure Archer didn't say anything but 'Felix7' before you killed him?" asked Hicks.

"Positive," assured Bowden in his best lying voice.

We returned to the LiteraTec office in a glum mood. Braxton's removal might provoke a dangerous shake-up in the department, and I had Mycroft and Polly to think of. Victor hung up his coat and called across to Finisterre, asking him if there had been any change. Finisterre looked up from a much-thumbed copy of *Chuzzlewit*. He, Bailey and Herr Bight had been rereading it on a twenty-four-hour relay basis since Acheron's escape. Nothing seemed to have changed. It was slightly perplexing. The Forty brothers had been working on the only piece of information we had that SO-5 or Goliath didn't. Sturmey Archer had made a reference to a Dr. Muller before expiring and that had been the subject of a rigorous search on SpecOps and police databases. A rigorous yet *secretive* search; that was what had taken the time.

"Anything, Jeff?" asked Victor, rolling up his shirtsleeves.

Jeff coughed.

"There are no Dr. Mullers registered in England or on the continent, either in medicine or philosophy--"

"So it's a false name."

"--who are *alive*." Jeff smiled. "However, there *was* a Dr. Muller in attendance at Parkhurst prison in 1972."

"I'm listening."

"It was at the same time that Delamare was banged up for fraud."

"This is getting better."

"And Delamare had a cellmate named Felix Tabularasa."

"There's a face that fits," murmured Bowden.

"Right. Dr. Muller was already under investigation for selling donor kidneys. He committed suicide in '74 shortly before the hearing. Swam into the sea after leaving a note. His body was never recovered."

Victor rubbed his hands together happily.

"Sounds like a faked death. How do we go about hunting down a dead man?"

Jeff held up a fax.

"I've had to use up a lot of favors at the English Medical Council; they don't like giving out personal files whether the subject is alive or dead, but here it is."

Victor took the fax and read out the pertinent points.

"Theodore Muller. Majored in physics before pursuing a career in medicine. Struck off in '74 for gross professional misconduct. He was a fine tenor, a good Hamlet at Cambridge, Brother of the Most Worshipful Order of the Wombat, keen train-spotter and a founding member of the Earthcrossers."

"Hmm," I murmured. "It's a good bet that he might continue to indulge himself in old hobbies even if he was living under an assumed name."

"What do you suggest?" asked Victor. "Wait until the next steam train extravaganza? I understand the *Mallard* is defending her speed record next month."

"Not soon enough."

"The Wombats *never* disclose membership," observed Bowden.

Victor nodded. "Well, that's that, then."

"Not exactly," I said slowly.

"Go on."

"I was thinking more about someone infiltrating the next Earthcrossers meeting."

"Earthcrossers?" said Victor with more than his fair share of incredulity. "You've got no chance, Thursday. Weird lunatics doing strange things privately on deserted hillsides? Do you know what you have to go through to be admitted to their exclusive club?"

I smiled.

"It's mostly distinguished and respected professional people of mature years."

Victor looked at Bowden and me in turn.

"I don't like that look you're giving me."

Bowden quickly scoured a copy of the current *Astronomer's Almanac*.

"Bingo. It says here that they meet on Liddington Hill at two P.M. the day after tomorrow. That gives us fifty-five hours to prepare."

"No way," said Victor indignantly. "There is no way, I repeat, no way on God's own earth that you are going to get me to pose as an Earthcrosser."



## 26.

### The Earthcrossers

An asteroid can be any size from a man's fist to a mountain. They are the detritus of the solar system, the rubbish left over after the workmen have been and gone. Most of the asteroids around today occupy a space between Mars and Jupiter. There are millions of them, yet their combined mass is a fraction of the Earth's. Every now and then an asteroid's orbit coincides with that of Earth. An *Earthcrosser*. To the Earthcrossers Society the arrival of an asteroid at a planet is the return of a lost orphan, a prodigal son. It is a matter of some consequence.

MR.S.A.ORBITER

--*The Earthcrossers*

LIDDINGTON HILL overlooks the RAF and later Luftwaffe airfield of Wroughton. The low hill is also home to an Iron Age fort, one of several that ring the Marlborough and Lambourn downs. The antiquity of the site, however, was not what attracted the Earthcrossers. They had gathered in almost every country of the globe, following the peculiar predictions of their calling in an apparently random fashion. They always observed the same routine: name the site, do a very good deal with the owners for exclusivity, then move in the month before using either local security or more junior members of the group to ensure that no infiltrators find their way in. It was perhaps due to this extreme secrecy that the militant astronomical group managed to keep what they did absolutely quiet. It seemed an almost perfect hiding place for Dr. Muller, who co-devised the society in the early fifties with Samuel Orbiter, a notable television astronomer of the time.

Victor parked his car and walked nonchalantly up to two huge gorilla-sized men who were standing next to a Land Rover. Victor looked to the left and right. Every three hundred yards was a group of armed security men with walkie-talkies and dogs, keeping an eye out for trespassers. There was no way on earth that anyone could slip by unseen. The best means of entering anywhere you aren't allowed to go is to walk in the front door as though you own the place.

"Afternoon," said Victor, attempting to walk past. One of the gorillas stepped into his way and put a huge hand on his shoulder.

"Good afternoon, sir. Fine day. May I see your pass?"

"Of course," said Victor, fumbling in his pocket. He produced the pass inserted behind the worn plastic window of his wallet. If the gorillas took it out and saw that it was a photocopy, then all would be lost.

"I haven't seen you around before, sir," said one of the men suspiciously.

"No," replied Victor evenly, "you'll see from my card that I belong to the Berwick-upon-Tweed spiral arm."

The first man passed the wallet to his comrade.

"We've been having problems with infiltrators, isn't that so, Mr. Europa?"

The second man grunted and passed the wallet back to Victor.

"Name?" asked the first, holding up a clipboard.

"I probably won't be on the list," said Victor slowly. "I'm a latecomer. I called Dr. Muller last night."

"I don't know of any Dr. Muller," said the first, sucking in air through his teeth as he looked at Victor with narrowed eyes, "but if you *are* an Earthcrosser you will have no problem telling me which of the planets has the highest density."

Victor looked from one to the other and laughed. They laughed with him.

"Of course not."

He took a step forward but the smile on the men's faces dropped. One of them put out another massive hand to stop him.

"Well?"

"This is preposterous," said Victor indignantly. "I've been an Earthcrosser for thirty years and I've never had this sort of treatment before."

"We don't like infiltrators," said the first man again. "They try to give us a bad name. Do you want to know what we do to bogus members? Now. Again. Which of the planets has the highest density?"

Victor looked at the two men, who looked back at him menacingly.

"It's Earth. The lowest is Pluto, okay?"

The two security men were not yet convinced.

"Kindergarten stuff, mister. How long is a weekend on Saturn?"

Two miles away in Bowden's car, Bowden and I were frantically calculating the answer and transmitting it down the line to the earpiece that Victor was wearing. The car was stuffed with all sorts of reference books on astronomy; all that we could hope was that none of the questions would be too obscure.

"Twenty hours," said Bowden down the line to Victor.

"About twenty hours," said Victor to the two men.

"Orbital velocity of Mercury?"

"Would that be aphelion or perihelion?"

"Don't get smart, pal. Average will do."

"Let me see now. Add the two together and--ah, good Lord, is that a ringed chaffinch?"

The two men didn't turn to look.

"Well?"

"It's, um, one hundred and six thousand miles per hour."

"Uranus' moons?"

"Uranus?" replied Victor, stalling for time. "Don't you think it's amusing that they changed the pronunciation?"

"The moons, sir."

"Of course. Oberon, Titania, Umb--"

"Hold it! A *real* Earthcrosser would have logged the closest first!"

Victor sighed as Bowden reversed the order over the airwaves.

"Cordelia, Ophelia, Bianca, Cressida, Desdemona, Juliet, Portia, Rosalind, Belinda, Puck, Miranda, Ariel, Umbriel, Titania and Oberon."

The two men looked at Victor, nodded and then stepped back to let him pass, their manner changed abruptly to acute politeness.

"Thank you, sir. Sorry about that but, as I'm sure you realize, there are very many people who would like to see us stopped. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course, and may I congratulate you on your thoroughness, gentlemen. Good-day."

As Victor walked by they stopped him again.

"Aren't you forgetting something, sir?"

Victor turned. I had wondered about some sort of password, and if that was what they wanted now we were sunk. He decided to let them lead the situation.

"Leave it in the car, sir?" asked the first man after a pause. "Here, borrow mine."

The security man reached inside his jacket and pulled out, not a gun as Victor expected, but a baseball catcher's glove. He smiled and handed it over.

"I dare say I won't make it up there today."

Victor slapped his own forehead with the ball of his hand.

"Mind like a string bag. I must have left it at home. Imagine, coming to an Earthcrossers meet and forgetting my catcher's glove!"

They all laughed with him dutifully; the first guard said:

"Have a good time, sir. Earthstrike is at 14:32."

He thanked them both and hopped into the waiting Land Rover before they changed their minds. He looked at the catcher's glove uneasily. What on earth were they up to?

The Land Rover dropped him at the east entrance to the hill-fort. He could see about fifty people milling around, all wearing steel helmets. A large tent had been set up in the center of the fort and it bristled with aerials and a large satellite dish. Farther up the hill was a radar scanner that revolved slowly. He had expected to see a large telescope or something, but no such apparatus seemed to have been set up.

"Name?"

Victor turned to see a small man staring up at him. He was holding a clipboard and wearing a steel helmet and seemed to be taking full advantage of his limited authority.

Victor attempted a bluff.

"That's me there," he said, pointing at a name at the bottom of the list.

"Mr. Continued Overleaf, are you?"

"Above that," Victor countered hurriedly.

"Mrs. Trotswell?"

"Oh, er, no. Ceres. Augustus Ceres."

The small man consulted his list carefully, running a steel ballpoint pen down the row of names.

"No one of that name here," he said slowly, looking at Victor suspiciously.

"I'm from Berwick-upon-Tweed," explained Victor. "Late entry. I don't suppose the news filtered through. Dr. Muller said I could drop in any time."

The small man jumped.

"Muller? There's no one here of that name. You must mean Dr. Cassiopeia." He winked and smiled broadly. "Okay. Now," he added, consulting his list and looking around the fort, "we're a bit thin on the outer perimeter. You can take station B3. Do you have a glove? Good. What about a helmet? Never mind. Here, take mine; I'll get another from stores. Earthstrike at 14:32. Good-day."

Victor took the helmet and wandered off in the direction that the small man had indicated.

"Hear that, Thursday?" he hissed. "Dr. Cassiopeia."

"I heard it," I replied. "We're seeing what we've got on him."

Bowden was already contacting Finisterre, who was waiting back at the Litera Tec office for just such a call.

Victor filled his briar pipe and was walking toward station B3 when a man in a Barbour jacket nearly marched straight into him. He recognized Dr. Muller's face from the mugshot immediately. Victor raised his hat, apologized and walked on.

"Wait!" yelled Muller. Victor turned. Muller raised an eyebrow and stared at him.

"Haven't I seen your face somewhere else?"

"No, it's always been right here on the front of my head," replied Victor, attempting to make light of the situation. Muller simply stared at him with a blank expression as Victor carried on filling his pipe.

"I've seen you somewhere before," continued Muller, but Victor was not so easily shaken.

"I don't think so," he announced, offering his hand. "Ceres," he

added. "Berwick-upon-Tweed spiral arm."

"Berwick-upon-Tweed, eh?" said Muller. "Then you know my good friend and colleague Professor Barnes?"

"Never heard of him," announced Victor, guessing that Muller was suspicious. Muller smiled and looked at his watch. "Earthstrike in seven minutes, Mr. Ceres. Perhaps you'd better take your station."

Victor lit his pipe, smiled and walked off in the direction he had been given earlier. There was a stake in the ground marked B3, and he stood around feeling slightly stupid. All the other Earthcrossers had donned their helmets and were scanning the sky to the west. Victor looked around and caught the eye of an attractive woman of about his own age a half-dozen paces away at B2.

"Hello!" he said cheerfully, tipping his helmet.

The woman fluttered her eyelashes demurely.

"All well?" she asked.

"Top hole!" returned Victor elegantly, then added quickly: "Actually, not. This is my first time."

The lady smiled at him and waved her catcher's glove.

"Nothing to it. Catch away from the body and keep your eyes sharp. We may get a lot or none at all, and if you *do* catch one, be sure to put it down on the grass straight away. After deaccelerating through the Earth's atmosphere, they tend to be a trifle hot."

Victor stared at her.

"You mean, we aim to *catch* meteors?"

The lady laughed a delicious laugh.

"No, no, silly!--They're called *meteorites*. Meteors are things that burn up in the Earth's atmosphere. I've been to seventeen of these suspected Earthstrikes since '64. I once nearly caught one in Tierra del Fuego in '71. Of course," she added more slowly, "that was when dear George was still alive . . ."

She caught his eye and smiled. Victor smiled back. She carried on:

"If we witness an Earthstrike today, it will be the first predicted strike in Europe to be successful. Imagine catching a meteorite! The rubble made during the creation of the universe over four and a half billion years ago! It's like an orphan finally coming home!"

"Very . . . poetic," responded Victor slowly as I started talking in his ear by way of the wire.

"There's no one listed anywhere by the name of Dr. Cassiopeia," I told him. "For goodness' sake don't let him out of your sight!"

"I won't," replied Victor, looking around for Muller.

"Pardon?" asked the lady at B2, who had been eyeing him up and not staring at the sky at all.

"I won't, er, drop one if I catch one," he replied hurriedly.

The Tannoy announced the Earthstrike in two minutes. There was a

murmur from the expectant crowd.

"Good luck!" said the lady, giving him a broad wink and staring up into the cloudless sky.

There was a voice from close behind Victor.

"I *do* remember you."

He turned to see the very unwelcome face of Dr. Muller staring at him. A little farther on stood a burly security guard, hand at the ready in his breast pocket.

"You're SpecOps. Litera Tec. Victor Analogy, isn't it?"

"No, the name's Dr. Augustus Ceres, Berwick-upon-Tweed." Victor laughed nervously and added: "What sort of a name is Victor Analogy?"

Muller beckoned to the henchman, who advanced on Victor drawing his automatic. He looked like the sort of person who was itching to use it.

"I'm sorry, my friend," said Muller kindly, "but that's not really good enough. If you *are* Analogy, you're clearly meddling. If, however, you turn out to be Dr. Ceres from Berwick-upon-Tweed, then you have my sincerest apologies."

"Now wait a moment--" began Victor, but Muller interrupted.

"I'll let your family know where to find the body," he said magnanimously.

Victor glanced around for possible help but all the other Earthcrossers were staring at the sky.

"Shoot him."

The henchman smiled, his finger tightening on the trigger. Victor winced as a high-pitched scream filled the air and a fortuitous incoming meteorite shattered on the henchman's helmet. He collapsed like a sack of potatoes. The gun went off and put a neat hole in Victor's baseball glove. Suddenly, the air was full of red-hot meteorites screaming to earth in a localized shower. The assembled Earthcrossers were thrown into confusion by the sudden violence and couldn't quite make up their minds whether to avoid the meteorites or try to catch them. Muller fumbled in his jacket pocket for his own pistol as someone yelled "*Yours!*" close at hand. They both turned, but it was Victor who caught the small meteorite. It was about the size of a cricket ball and was still glowing red hot; he tossed it to Muller, who instinctively caught it. Sadly, he did not have a catcher's glove. There was a hiss and a yelp as he dropped it, then a cry of pain as Victor took the opportunity to thump him on the jaw with a speed that belied his seventy-five years. Muller went down like a ninepin and Victor leaped on the dropped gun. He thrust it against Muller's neck, dragged him to his feet and started to march him out of the hill-fort. The meteorite shower was easing up as he backed out, my voice in his

earpiece telling him to go easy.

"It is Analogy, isn't it?" said Muller.

"It is. SpecOps-27 and you're under arrest."

Victor, Bowden and I had got Muller as far as interview room 3 before Braxton and Schitt realized who we had captured. Victor had barely asked Muller to confirm his name before the interview room door burst open. It was Schitt flanked by two SO-9 operatives. None of them looked like they had a sense of humor.

"My prisoner, Analogy."

"My prisoner, Mr. Schitt, I think," replied Victor firmly. "My collar, my jurisdiction; I am interviewing Dr. Muller about the *Chuzzlewit* theft."

Jack Schitt looked at Commander Hicks, who was standing behind him. The commander sighed and cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry to say this, Victor, but the Goliath Corporation and their representative have been granted jurisdiction over SO-27 and SO-9 in Swindon. Withholding material from Acting SpecOps Commander Schitt may result in criminal proceedings for concealment of vital information pertinent to an ongoing inquiry. Do you understand what this means?"

"It means Schitt does what he pleases," returned Victor.

"Relinquish your prisoner, Victor. The Goliath Corporation takes precedence."

Victor stared at him hotly, then pushed his way out of the interview room.

"I'd like to stay," I requested.

"No chance," said Schitt. "An SO-27 security clearance is *not* permissible."

"It's as well, then," I replied, "that I still hold an SO-5 badge."

Jack Schitt cursed but said nothing more. Bowden was ordered out and the two SO-9 operatives stood either side of the door; Schitt and Hicks sat down at the table behind which Muller nonchalantly smoked a cigarette. I leaned against the wall and impassively watched the proceedings.

"He'll get me out, you know," Muller said slowly as he smiled a rare smile.

"I don't think so," remarked Schitt. "Swindon SpecOps is currently surrounded by more SO-9 operatives and SWAT men than you can count in a month. Not even that madman Hades would try and get in here."

The smile dropped from Muller's lips.

"SO-9 is the finest antiterrorist squad on the planet," continued Schitt. "We'll get him, you know. It's only a question of when. And if

you help us, things might not look so bad in court for you."

Muller wasn't impressed.

"If your SO-9 operatives are the best on the planet, how come it takes a seventy-five-year-old Litera Tec to arrest me?"

Jack Schitt couldn't think of an answer to this. Muller turned to me.

"And if SO-9 are so shit hot, why does this young lady have the best luck cornering Hades?"

"I got lucky," I replied, adding: "Why hasn't Martin Chuzzlewit been killed? It's not like Acheron to make idle threats."

"No indeed," replied Muller. "No indeed."

"Answer the question, Muller," said Schitt pointedly. "I can make things *very* uncomfortable for you."

Muller smiled at him.

"Not half as uncomfortable as Acheron could. He lists slow murder, torture and flower arranging as his hobbies in *Which Criminal*."

"So you want to do some serious time?" asked Hicks, who wasn't going to be left out of the interview. "The way I see it you're looking at quintuple life. Or you could walk free in a couple of minutes. What's it to be?"

"Do as you will, officers. You'll get nothing out of me. No matter what, Hades *will* get me out."

Muller folded his arms and leaned back in the chair. There was a pause. Schitt bent forward and switched off the tape recorder. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and draped it across the video camera in the corner of the interview room. Hicks and I looked at one another nervously. Muller watched the proceedings but didn't seem unduly alarmed.

"Let's try it again," said Schitt, pulling out his automatic and pointing it at Muller's shoulder. "Where is Hades?"

Muller looked at him.

"You can kill me now or Hades kills me later when he finds I've talked. I'm dead either way and your death is probably a great deal less painful than Acheron's. I've seen him at work. You wouldn't believe what he is capable of."

"I would," I said slowly.

Schitt released the safety on his automatic. "I'll count to three."

"I can't tell you!--"

"One."

"He'd kill me."

"Two."

I took my cue. "We can offer you protective custody."

"From him?" demanded Muller. "Are you *completely* nuts?"

"Three!"

Muller closed his eyes and started to shake. Schitt put the gun



down. This wasn't going to work. Suddenly, I had a thought.

"He doesn't have the manuscript anymore, does he?"

Muller opened an eye and looked at me. It was the sign I'd been looking for.

"Mycroft destroyed it, didn't he?" I continued, reasoning as my uncle might have--and did.

"Is that what happened?" asked Jack Schitt. Muller said nothing.

"He'll be wanting to find an alternative," observed Hicks.

"There must be thousands of original manuscripts out there," murmured Schitt. "We can't cover them all. Which one is he after?"

"I can't tell you," stuttered Muller, his resolve beginning to leave him. "He'd kill me."

"He'll kill you when he finds out you told us that Mycroft destroyed the *Chuzzlewit* manuscript," I responded evenly.

"But I didn't!--"

"He's not to know. We can protect you, Muller, but we need to capture Hades. Where is he?"

Muller looked at us one by one.

"Protective custody?" he stammered. "It'll need a small army."

"I can supply that," asserted Schitt, using the truth with an economy for which he had become famous. "The Goliath Corporation is prepared to be generous in this matter."

"Okay . . . I'll tell you."

He looked at us all and wiped his brow, which had suddenly started to glisten.

"Isn't it a bit hot in here?" he asked.

"No," replied Schitt. "Where's Hades?"

"Well, he's at . . . the--"

He suddenly stopped talking. His face contorted with fear as a violent spasm of pain hit his lower back and he cried out in agony.

"Tell us quick!" shouted Schitt, leaping to his feet and grabbing the stricken man's lapels.

"Pen-deryn!--" he screamed. "He's at!--"

"Tell us more!" roared Schitt. "There must be a thousand Penderyns!"

"Guess!" screamed Muller. "G-weuess . . . *ahhh*!"

"I'll not play your games!" yelled Schitt, shaking the man vigorously.

"Tell me or I'll kill you with my bare hands right now!"

But Muller was now beyond rational thought or Schitt's threats. He squirmed and fell to the floor, writhing in agony.

"Medic!" I screamed, dropping to the floor next to the convulsing Muller, whose open mouth screamed a silent scream as his eyes rolled up into his head. The smell of scorched clothes reached my nostrils. I leaped back as a bright orange flame shot out of Muller's back. It

ignited the rest of him and we all had to beat a hasty retreat as the intense heat reduced Muller to ash in under ten minutes.

"Damn!" muttered Schitt when the acrid smoke had cleared. Muller was a heap of cinders on the floor. There wouldn't even be enough to identify him.

"Hades," I murmured. "Some sort of built-in safety device. As soon as Muller starts to blab . . . up he goes. Very neat."

"You sound as if you almost respect him, Miss Next," observed Schitt.

"I can't help it." I shrugged. "Like the shark, Acheron has evolved into the almost perfect predator. I've never hunted big game and never would, but I can understand the appeal. The first thing," I went on, ignoring the smoking pile of ash that had recently been Muller, "is to treble the guards on any places where original manuscripts are held. After that we want to start looking at *anywhere* called Penderyn."

"I'll get onto it," said Hicks, who had been looking for a reason to go for some time.

Schitt and I were left looking at one another.

"Looks like we're on the same side, Miss Next."

"Sadly," I replied disdainfully. "You want the Prose Portal. I want my uncle back. Acheron has to be destroyed before either of us gets what we want. Until then we'll work together."

"A useful and happy union," replied Schitt with anything but happiness on his mind.

I pressed a finger to his tie.

"Understand this, Mr. Schitt. You may have might in your back pocket but I have right in mine. Believe me when I say I will do *anything* to protect my family. Do you understand?"

Schitt looked at me coldly.

"Don't try to threaten me, Miss Next. I could have you posted to the Lerwick Litera Tec office quicker than you can say 'Swift.' Remember that. You're here because you're good at what you do. Same reason as me. We are more alike than you think. Good-day, Miss Next."

A quick search revealed eighty-four towns and villages in Wales named Penderyn. There were twice as many streets and the same number again of pubs, clubs and associations. It wasn't surprising there were so many; Dic Penderyn had been executed in 1831 for wounding a soldier during the Merthyr riots--he was innocent and so became the first martyr of the Welsh rising and something of a figurehead for the republican struggle. Even if Goliath *could* infiltrate Wales, they wouldn't know which Pen-deryn to start with. Clearly, this was going to take some time.

Tired, I left to go home. I picked up my car from the garage, where

they had managed to replace the front axle, shoehorn in a new engine and repair the bullet holes, some of which had come perilously close. I rolled up at the Finis Hotel as a clipper-class airship droned slowly overhead. Dusk was just settling and the navigation lights on either side of the huge airship blinked languidly in the evening sky. It was an elegant sight, the ten propellers beating the air with a rhythmic hum; during the day an airship could eclipse the sun. I stepped inside the hotel. The Milton conference was over and Liz welcomed me now as a friend rather than as a guest.

"Good evening, Miss Next. All well?"

"Not really." I smiled. "But thanks for asking."

"Your dodo arrived this evening," announced Liz. "He's in kennel five. News travels fast; the Swindon Dodo Fanciers have been up already. They said he was a very rare Version one or something--they want you to call them."

"He's a 1.2," I murmured absently. Dodos weren't high on my list of priorities right now. I paused for a moment. Liz sensed my indecision.

"Can I get you anything?"

"Has, er, Mr. Parke-Laine called?"

"No. Were you expecting him to?"

"No--not really. If he calls, I'm in the Cheshire Cat if not my room. If you can't find me, can you ask him to call again in half an hour?"

"Why don't I just send a car to fetch him?"

"Oh God, is it that obvious?"

Liz nodded her head.

"He's getting married."

"But not to you?"

"No."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Me too. Has anyone ever asked you to marry them?"

"Sure."

"What did you say?"

"I said: 'Ask me again when you get out.' "

"Did he?"

"No."

I checked in with Pickwick, who seemed to have settled in well. He made excited *plock plock* noises when he saw me. Contradicting the theories of experts, dodos had turned out to be surprisingly intelligent and quite agile--the ungainly bird of common legend was quite wrong. I gave him some peanuts and smuggled him up to my room under a coat. It wasn't that the kennels were dirty or anything; I just didn't want him to be alone. I put his favorite rug in the bath to give him somewhere to roost and laid out some paper. I told him I'd move him

to my mother's the following day, then left him staring out of the window at the cars in the car park.

"Good evening, miss," said the barman in the Cheshire Cat. "Why is a raven like a writing desk?"

"Because there is a 'B' in 'both'?"

"Very good. Half of Vorpals special, was it?"

"You must be kidding. Gin and tonic. A double."

He smiled and turned to the optics.

"Police?"

"SpecOps."

"Litera Tec?"

"Yup."

I took my drink.

"I trained to be a LiteraTec," he said wistfully. "Made it to cadetship."

"What happened?"

"My girlfriend was a militant Marlovian. She converted some Will-Speak machines to quote from *Tamburlaine* and I was implicated when she was nabbed. And that was that. Not even the military would take me."

"What's your name?"

"Chris."

"Thursday."

We shook hands.

"I can only speak from experience, Chris, but I've been in the military *and* SpecOps and you should be thanking your girlfriend."

"I do," hastened Chris. "Every day. We're married now and have two kids. I do this bar job in the evenings and run the Swindon branch of the Kit Marlowe Society during the day. We have almost four thousand members. Not bad for an Elizabethan forger, murderer, gambler and atheist."

"There are some who say he might have written the plays usually attributed to Shakespeare."

Chris was taken aback. He was suspicious too.

"I'm not sure I should be discussing this with a Litera Tec."

"There's no law against discussion, Chris. Who do you think we are, the thought police?"

"No, that's SO-2 isn't it?"

"But about Marlowe--?"

Chris lowered his voice.

"Okay. I think Marlowe *might* have written the plays. He was undoubtedly a brilliant playwright, as *Faust*, *Tamburlaine* and *Edward II* would attest. He was the only person of his age who could have

actually done it. Forget Bacon and Oxford; Marlowe has to be the odds-on favorite."

"But Marlowe was murdered in 1593," I replied slowly. "Most of the plays were written *after* that."

Chris looked at me and lowered his voice.

"Sure. *If* he died in the bar fight that day."

"What are you saying?"

"It's possible his death was faked."

"Why?"

Chris took a deep breath. This was a subject he knew something about.

"Remember that Elizabeth was a Protestant queen. Anything like atheism or papism would deny the authority of the Protestant Church and the queen as the head."

"Treason," I murmured. "A capital offense."

"Exactly. In April 1593 the Privy Council arrested one Thomas Kyd in connection with some antigovernment pamphleteering. When his rooms were searched they revealed some atheistic writings."

"So?"

"Kyd fingered Marlowe. Said Marlowe had written them two years ago when they were rooming together. Marlowe was arrested and questioned on May 18, 1593; he was freed on bail so presumably there wasn't enough evidence to commit him for trial."

"What about his friendship with Walsingham?" I asked.

"I was coming to that. Walsingham had an influential position within the secret service; they had known each other for a number of years. With more evidence arriving daily against Marlowe, his arrest seemed inevitable. But on the morning of May 30, Marlowe is killed in a bar brawl, apparently over an unpaid bill."

"Very convenient."

"Very. It's my belief that Walsingham faked his friend's death. The three men in the tavern were all in his pay. He bribed the coroner and Marlowe set up Shakespeare as the front man. Will, an impoverished actor who knew Marlowe from his days at the Shoreditch Theater, probably leaped at the chance to make some money; his career seems to have taken off as Marlowe's ended."

"It's an interesting theory. But wasn't *Venus and Adonis* published a couple of months before Marlowe's death? Earlier even than Kyd's arrest?"

Chris coughed.

"Good point. All I can say is that the plot must have been hatched somewhat ahead of time, or that records have been muddled."

He paused for a moment, looked about and lowered his voice further.

"Don't tell the other Marlovians, but there is something else that points away from a faked death."

"I'm all ears."

"Marlowe was killed within the jurisdiction of the queen's coroner. There were sixteen jurors to view the *supposedly* switched body, and it is unlikely that the coroner could have been bribed. If I had been Walsingham I would have had Marlowe's death faked in the boonies where coroners were more easily bought. He could have gone farther and had the body disfigured in some way to make identification impossible."

"What are you saying?"

"That an equally probable theory is that Walsingham *himself* had Marlowe killed to stop him talking. Men say anything when tortured, and it's likely that Marlowe had all kinds of dirt on Walsingham."

"What then?" I asked. "How would you account for the lack of any firm evidence regarding Shakespeare's life, his curious double existence, the fact that no one seemed to know about his literary work in Stratford?"

Chris shrugged.

"I don't know, Thursday. Without Marlowe there is no one else in Elizabethan London even *able* to write the plays."

"Any theories?"

"None at all. But the Elizabethans were a funny bunch. Court intrigue, the secret service . . ."

"The more things change--"

"My point entirely. Cheers."

We clinked glasses and Chris wandered off to serve another customer. I played the piano for half an hour before retiring to bed. I checked with Liz but Landen hadn't called.

## Hades Finds Another Manuscript

I had hoped that I would find a manuscript by Austen or Trollope, Thackeray, Fielding or Swift. Maybe Johnson, Wells or Conan Doyle. Defoe would have been fun. Imagine my delight when I discovered that Charlotte Bronte's masterpiece *Jane Eyre* was on show at her old home. How can fate be more fortuitous? . . .

ACHERON HADES

*--Degeneracy for Pleasure and Profit*

OUR SAFETY recommendations had been passed to the Bronte museum and there were five armed security guards on duty that night. They were all burly Yorkshiremen, specially chosen for this most august of duties because of their strong sense of literary pride. One stayed in the room with the manuscript, another was on guard within the building, two patrolled outside, and the fifth was in a little room with six TV screens. The guard in front of the monitors ate an egg-and-onion sandwich and kept a diligent eye on the screens. He didn't see anything remiss on the monitors, but then Acheron's curious powers had never been declassified below SO-9.

It was easy for Hades to gain entry; he just slipped in through the kitchen door after forcing the lock with a crowbar. The guard patrolling inside didn't hear Acheron approach. His lifeless body was later found wedged beneath the Belfast sink. Acheron carefully mounted the stairs, trying not to make any noise. In reality he could have made as much noise as he liked. He knew the guards' .38s couldn't harm him, but what was the fun of just walking in and helping himself? He padded slowly up the corridor to the room where the manuscript was displayed and peered in. The room was empty. For some reason the guard was not in attendance. He walked up to the armored glass case and placed his hand just above the book. The glass beneath his flattened palm started to ripple and soften; pretty soon it was pliable enough for Hades to push his fingers through and grasp the manuscript. The destabilized glass twisted and stretched like rubber as the book was pulled clear and then rapidly reformed itself back into solid glass; the only evidence that its molecules had been rearranged was a slight mottling on the surface. Hades smiled triumphantly as he read the front page:

Jane Eyre

Acheron meant to take the book straight away, but he had always liked the story. Succumbing to temptation, he started to read.

It was open at the section where Jane Eyre is in bed and hears a low cackle of demonic laughter outside her room. Glad that the laughter is not coming from *within* her room, she arises and throws the bolt on the door, crying out:

"Who is there?"

By way of an answer there is only a low gurgle and a moan, the sound of steps retreating and then the shutting of a door. Jane wraps a shawl around her shoulders and slowly pulls back the bolt, opening the door a crack and peering cautiously outside. Upon the matting she espies a single candle and also notices that the corridor is full of smoke. The creak of Rochester's half-open door catches her attention, and then she notices the dim flicker of a fire within. Jane springs into action, forsaking all thoughts as she runs into Rochester's burning chamber and attempts to rouse the sleeping figure with the words:

"Wake! Wake!"

Rochester does not stir and Jane notices with growing alarm that the sheets of the bed are starting to turn brown and catch fire. She grasps the basin and ewer and throws water over him, running to her bedroom to fetch more to douse the curtains. After a struggle she extinguishes the fire and Rochester, cursing at finding himself waking in a pool of water, says to Jane:

"Is there a flood?"

"No, sir," she replies, "but there has been a fire. Get up, do; you are quenched now. I will fetch you a candle."

Rochester is not fully aware of what has happened.

"In the name of all the elves in Christendom, is that Jane Eyre?" he demands. "What have you done with me, witch, sorceress? Who is in the room besides you? Have you plotted to drown me?"

"Turn around *really* slowly."

The last line belonged to the guard, whose own demand broke into Acheron's reading.

"I *hate* it when that happens!" he lamented, turning to face the officer, who had his gun trained on him. "*Just* when you get to a good bit!"

"Don't move and put the manuscript down."

Acheron did as he was told. The guard unclipped his walkie-talkie and brought it up to his mouth.

"I shouldn't do that," said Acheron softly.

"Oh yes?" retorted the guard confidently. "And why the hell not?"



"Because," said Acheron slowly, catching the guard's eye and looking deep inside him, "you will never find out why your wife left you."

The guard lowered his walkie-talkie.

"What do you know about Denise?"

I was dreaming fitfully. It was the Crimea again; the *crump-crump-crump* of the guns and the metallic scream that an armored personnel carrier makes when hit. I could even taste the dust, the cordite and the amatol in the air, the muffled cries of my comrades, the directionless sound of the gunfire. The eighty-eight-caliber guns were so close they didn't need a trajectory. You never heard the one that hit you. I was back in the APC, returning to the fray despite orders to the contrary. I was driving across the grassland, past wreckage from previous battles. I felt something large pluck at my vehicle and the roof opened up, revealing a shaft of sunlight in the dust that was curiously beautiful. The same unseen hand picked up the carrier and threw it in the air. It ran along on one track for a few yards and then fell back upright. The engine was still functioning, the controls still felt right; I carried on, oblivious to the damage. It was only when I reached up for the wireless switch that I realized the roof had been blown off. It was a sobering discovery, but I had little time to muse. Ahead of me was the smoking wreckage of the pride of the Wessex Tank: the Light Armored Brigade. The Russian eighty-eights had fallen silent; the sound was now of small arms as the Russians and my comrades exchanged fire. I drove to the closest group of walking wounded and released the rear door. It was jammed but it didn't matter; the side door had vanished with the roof and I rapidly packed twenty-two wounded and dying soldiers into an APC designed to carry eight. Punctuating all this was the incessant ringing of a telephone. My brother, minus his helmet and with his face bloodied, was dealing with the wounded. He told me to come back for him. As I drove off the *spang* of rifle fire ricocheted off the armor; the Russian infantry were approaching. The phone was still ringing. I fumbled in the darkness for the handset, dropped it and scrabbled on the floor, swearing as I did so. It was Bowden.

"Are you okay?" he asked, sensing something was not quite right.

"I'm fine," I replied, by now well used to making everything appear normal. "What's the problem?" I looked across at my clock. It was 3 A.M. I groaned.

"Another manuscript has been stolen. I just got it over the wire. Same MO as *Chuzzlewit*. They just walked in and took it. Two guards dead. One by his own gun."

"*Jane Eyre*?"

"How the dickens did you know that?"

"Rochester told me."

"What?--"

"Never mind. Haworth House?"

"An hour ago."

"I'll pick you up in twenty minutes."

Within the hour we were driving north to join the M1 at Rugby. The night was clear and cool, the roads almost deserted. The roof was up and the heating full on, but even so it was drafty as the gale outside tried to find a toehold in the hood. I shuddered to think what it might be like driving the car in winter. By 5 A.M. we would make Rugby and it would be easier from there.

"I hope I shan't regret this," murmured Bowden. "Braxton won't be terribly happy when he finds out."

"Whenever people say: 'I hope I won't regret this,' they do. So if you want me to let you out, I will. Stuff Braxton. Stuff Goliath and stuff Jack Schitt. Some things are more important than rules and regulations. Governments and fashions come and go but *Jane Eyre* is for all time. I would give everything to ensure the novel's survival."

Bowden said nothing. Working with me, I suspected, was the first time he had really started to enjoy being in SpecOps. I shifted down a gear to overtake a slow-moving lorry and then accelerated away.

"How did you know it was *Jane Eyre* when I rang?"

I thought for a minute. If I couldn't tell Bowden, I couldn't tell anyone. I pulled Rochester's handkerchief out of my pocket.

"Look at the monogram."

"EFR?"

"It belongs to Edward Fairfax Rochester."

Bowden looked at me doubtfully.

"Careful, Thursday. While I fully admit that I might not be the best Bronte scholar, even I know that these people aren't actually *real*."

"Real or not, I've met him several times. I have his coat too."

"Wait--I understand about Quaverley's extraction but what are you saying? That characters can jump spontaneously from the pages of novels?"

"I heartily agree that something odd is going on; something I can't possibly explain. The barrier between myself and Rochester has softened. It's not just him making the jump either; I once entered the book myself when I was a little girl. I arrived at the moment they met. Do you remember it?"

Bowden looked sheepish and stared out of the sidescreen at a passing petrol station.

"That's very cheap for unleaded."

I guessed the reason.

"You've never read it, have you?"

"Well--" he stammered. "It's just that, er--"

I laughed.

"Well, well, a Litera Tec who hasn't read *Jane Eyre*?"

"Okay, okay, don't rub it in. I studied *Wuthering Heights* and *Villette* instead. I meant to give it my fullest attention but like many things it must have slipped my mind."

"I had better run it by you."

"Perhaps you should," agreed Bowden grumpily.

I told him the story of *Jane Eyre* over the next hour, starting with the young orphan Jane, her childhood with Mrs. Reed and her cousins, her time at Lowood, a frightful charity school run by a cruel and hypocritical evangelist; then the outbreak of typhus and the death of her good friend Helen Burns; after that of how Jane rises to become a model pupil and eventually student teacher under the principal, Miss Temple.

"Jane leaves Lowood and moves to Thornfield, where she has one charge, Rochester's ward, Adele."

"Ward?" asked Bowden. "What's that?"

"Well," I replied, "I guess it's a polite way of saying that she is the product of a previous liaison. If Rochester lived today Adele would be splashed all over the front page of *The Toad* as a 'love child.' "

"But he did the decent thing?"

"Oh, yes. Anyhow, Thornfield is a pleasant place to live, if not slightly strange--Jane has the idea that there is something going on that no one is talking about. Rochester returns home after an absence of three months and turns out to be a sullen, dominating personality, but he is impressed by Jane's fortitude when she saves him from being burned by a mysterious fire in his bedroom. Jane falls in love with Rochester but has to witness his courtship of Blanche Ingram, a sort of nineteenth-century bimbo. Jane leaves to attend to Mrs. Reed, who is dying and when she returns, Rochester asks her to marry him; he has realized in her absence that the qualities of Jane's character far outweigh those of Miss Ingram, despite the difference in their social status."

"So far so good."

"Don't count your chickens. A month later the wedding ceremony is interrupted by a lawyer who claims that Rochester is already married and his first wife--Bertha--is still living. He accuses Rochester of bigamy, which is found to be true. The mad Bertha Rochester lives in a room on the upper floor of Thornfield, attended to by the strange Grace Poole. It was she who had attempted to set fire to Rochester in his bed all those months ago. Jane is deeply shocked--as you can

imagine--and Rochester tries to excuse his conduct, claiming that his love for her was real. He asks her to go away with him as his mistress, but she refuses. Still in love with him, Jane runs away and finds herself in the home of the Rivers, two sisters and a brother who turn out to be her first cousins."

"Isn't that a bit unlikely?"

"Shh. Jane's uncle, who is also *their* uncle, has just died and leaves her all his money. She divides it among them all and settles down to an independent existence. The brother, St. John Rivers, decides to go to India as a missionary and wants Jane to marry him and serve the church. Jane is quite happy to serve him, but not to marry him. She believes that marriage is a union of love and mutual respect, not something that should be a duty. There is a long battle of wills and finally she agrees to go with him to India as his assistant. It is in India, with Jane building a new life, that the book ends."

"And that's it?" asked Bowden in surprise.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, the ending does sound a bit of an anticlimax. We try to make art perfect because we never manage it in real life and here is Charlotte Bronte concluding her novel--presumably something which has a sense of autobiographical wishful thinking about it--in a manner that reflects her own disappointed love life. If I had been Charlotte I would have made certain that Rochester and Jane were reunited--married, if possible."

"Don't ask me," I said, "I didn't write it." I paused. "You're right, of course," I murmured. "It is a crap ending. Why, when all was going so well, does the ending just cop out on the reader? Even the *Jane Eyre* purists agree that it would have been far better for them to have tied the knot."

"How, with Bertha still around?"

"I don't know; she could die or something. It is a problem, isn't it?"

"How do you know it so well?" asked Bowden.

"It's always been a favorite of mine. I had a copy of it in my jacket pocket when I was shot. It stopped the bullet. Rochester appeared soon after and kept pressure on my arm wound until the medics arrived. He and the book saved my life."

Bowden looked at his watch.

"Yorkshire is still many miles away. We shan't get there until-- Hello, what's this?"

There appeared to be an accident on the motorway ahead. Two dozen or so cars had stopped in front of us and when nothing moved for a couple of minutes I pulled onto the hard shoulder and drove slowly to the front of the queue. A traffic cop hailed us to stop, looked doubtfully at the bullet holes in the paintwork of my car and then

said:

"Sorry, ma'am. Can't let you through--"

I held up my old SpecOps-5 badge and his manner changed.

"Sorry, ma'am. There's something *unusual* ahead."

Bowden and I exchanged looks and got out of the car. Behind us a crowd of curious onlookers was being held back by a POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS tape. They stood in silence to watch the spectacle unfold in front of their eyes. Three squad cars and an ambulance were on the scene already; two paramedics were attending to a newborn infant who was wrapped up in a blanket and howling plaintively. The officers were all relieved that I had arrived--the highest rank there was sergeant and they were glad to be able to foist the responsibility onto someone else, and someone from SO-5 was as high an operative as any of them had even *seen*.

I borrowed a pair of binoculars and looked up the empty motorway. About five hundred yards away the road and starry night sky had spiraled into the shape of a whirlpool, a funnel that was crushing and distorting the light that managed to penetrate the vortex. I sighed. My father had told me about temporal distortions but I had never seen one. In the center of the whirlpool, where the refracted light had been whipped up into a jumbled pattern, there was an inky black hole, which seemed to have neither depth nor color, just shape: a perfect circle the size of a grapefruit. Traffic on the opposite motorway had also been stopped by the police, the flashing blue lights slowing to red as they shone through the fringes of the black mass, distorting the image of the road beyond like the refraction on the edge of a jam jar. In front of the vortex was a blue Datsun, the bonnet already starting to stretch as it approached the distortion. Behind that was a motorcycle, and behind this and closest to us was a green family sedan. I watched for a minute or so, but all the vehicles appeared motionless on the tarmac. The rider, his motorcycle and all the occupants of the cars seemed to be frozen like statues.

"Blast!" I muttered under my breath as I glanced at my watch. "How long since it opened up?"

"About an hour," answered the sergeant. "There was some kind of accident involving an ExcoMat containment vehicle. Couldn't have happened at a worse time; I was about to come off shift."

He jerked a thumb in the direction of the baby on the stretcher, who had put his fingers in his mouth and stopped yelling. "That was the driver. Before the accident he was thirty-one. By the time we got here he was eight--in a few minutes he'll be nothing more than a damp patch on the blanket."

"Have you called the ChronoGuard?"

"I called 'em," he answered resignedly. "But a patch of bad time

opened up near Tesco's in Wareham. They can't be here for at least four hours."

I thought quickly.

"How many people have been lost so far?"

"Sir," said an officer, pointing up the road, "I think you had better see this!"

We all watched as the blue Datsun started to contort and stretch, fold and shrink as it was sucked through the hole. Within a few seconds it had disappeared completely, compressed to a billionth of its size and catapulted to Elsewhere.

The sergeant pushed his cap to the back of his head and sighed. There was nothing he could do.

I repeated my question.

"How many?"

"Oh, the truck has gone, an entire mobile library, twelve cars and a motorcycle. Maybe twenty people."

"That's a lot of matter," I said grimly. "The distortion could grow to the size of a football field by the time the ChronoGuard get here."

The sergeant shrugged. He had never been briefed on what to do with temporal instabilities. I turned to Bowden.

"Come on."

"What?"

"We've a little job to do."

"You're crazy!"

"Perhaps."

"Can't we wait for the ChronoGuard?"

"They'd never get here in time. It's easy. A lobotomized monkey could do it."

"And where are we going to find a lobotomized monkey at this time of night?"

"You're being windy, Bowden."

"True. Do you know what will happen if we fail?"

"We won't. It's a doddle. Dad was in the ChronoGuard; he told me all about this sort of thing. The secret is in the spheres. In four hours we could be seeing a major global disaster occurring right in front of our eyes. A rent in time so large we won't know for sure that the here-and-now isn't the there-and-then. The rout of civilization, panic in the streets, the end of the world as we know it. Hey, kid!--"

I had seen a young lad bouncing a basketball on the road. The boy reluctantly gave it to me and I returned to Bowden, who was waiting uneasily by the car. We put the hood down and Bowden sat in the passenger seat, clutching the basketball grimly.

"A basketball?"

"It's a sphere, isn't it?" I replied, remembering Dad's advice all those

years ago. "Are you ready?"

"Ready," replied Bowden in a slightly shaky voice.

I started the car and rolled slowly up to where the traffic police stood in shocked amazement.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" asked the young officer.

"Sort of," I replied, truthfully enough. "Does anyone have a watch with a second hand?"

The youngest traffic cop took his watch off and handed it over. I noted the *real* time--5:30 A.M.--and then reset the hands to twelve o'clock. I strapped the watch onto the rear-view mirror.

The sergeant wished us good luck as we drove off, yet his thoughts were more along the lines of "sooner you than me."

Around us the sky was lightening into dawn, yet the area around the vehicles was still night. Time for the trapped cars had stood still, but only to observers from the outside. To the occupants, everything was happening as normal, except that if they looked behind them they would witness the dawn breaking rapidly.

The first fifty yards seemed plain enough to Bowden and me, but as we drove closer the car and bike seemed to speed up and by the time we had drawn level with the green car we were both moving at about sixty miles per hour. I glanced at the watch on the rear-view mirror and noted that precisely three minutes had elapsed.

Bowden had been watching what was going on behind us. As he and I drove toward the instability the officers' movements seemed to accelerate until they were just a blur. The cars that had been blocking the carriageway were turned around and directed swiftly back down the hard shoulder at a furious rate. Bowden also noticed the sun rising rapidly behind us and wondered quite what he had let himself in for.

The green sedan had two occupants; a man and a woman. The woman was asleep and the driver was looking at the dark hole that had opened up in front of them. I shouted to him to stop. He wound down his window and I repeated myself, added "SpecOps!" and waved my ID. He dutifully applied his brakes and his stoplights came on, puncturing the darkness. Three minutes and twenty-six seconds had elapsed since we had begun our journey.

From where the ChronoGuard were standing, they could just see the brake lights on the green sedan come languidly on in the funnel of darkness that was the event's influence. They watched the progress of the green sedan over the next ten minutes as it made an almost imperceptible turn toward the hard shoulder. It was nearly 10 A.M. and an advance ChronoGuard outfit had arrived direct from Wareham. Their equipment and operatives were being airlifted in an SO-12

Chinook helicopter, and Colonel Rutter had flown ahead to see what needed to be done. He had been surprised that two ordinary officers had volunteered for this hazardous duty, especially as nobody could tell him who we were. Even a check of my car registration didn't help, as it was still listed as belonging to the garage I had bought it from. The only positive thing about the whole damn mess, he noted, was the fact that the passenger seemed to be holding a sphere of some sort. If the hole grew any bigger and time slowed down even more it might take them several months to reach us, even in the fastest vehicle they had. He lowered the binoculars and sighed. It was a stinking, lousy, lonely job. He had been working in the ChronoGuard for almost forty years, Standard Earth Time. In logged work time he was 209. In his own personal physiological time he was barely

28. His children were older than him and his wife was in a nursing home. He had thought the higher rates of pay would compensate him for any problems, but they didn't.

As the green sedan fell quickly away behind us, Bowden again looked back and saw the sun rising faster and higher. A helicopter arrived in a flash with the distinctive "CG" motif of the ChronoGuard. Ahead of us now there was only the motorcyclist, who seemed to be perilously close to the dark, swirling hole. He wore red leathers and was driving a top-of-the-range Triumph motorcycle, ironically enough about the only bike capable of escape from the vortex if he had known what the problem was. We had taken another six minutes to catch up with him and as we approached a roaring sound started to rise above the wind noise; the sort of scream a typhoon might make as it passed over the top of you. We were still about twelve feet behind and finding it difficult to keep up. The speedometer needle on the Porsche touched ninety as we roared along together. I blew my horn but the screaming drowned it out.

"Get ready!" I shouted to Bowden as the wind whipped our hair and the air tugged at our clothes. I flashed my lights at the bike again and at last he saw us. He turned around and waved, mistook our intent for a desire to initiate a race, kicked down a gear and accelerated away. The vortex caught him in an instant and he seemed to stretch out and around and inside out as he flowed rapidly into the instability; within what appeared to be a second he had gone. As soon as I thought we could get no closer I stamped on the brakes and yelled:

*"Now!"*

Smoke poured off the tires as we careened across the tarmac; Bowden threw the basketball, which seemed to swell in size with the hole, the ball flattening to a disc and the hole stretching out to a line.



We saw the basketball hit the hole, bounce once and let us through. I glanced at the watch as we tipped through into the abyss, the basketball shutting out the last glimpse of the world we had left behind as we dropped through to Elsewhere. Up until the point we passed the event, twelve minutes and forty-one seconds had elapsed. Outside it had been closer to seven hours.

"Motorcycle's gone," remarked Colonel Rutter. His second-in-command grunted in reply. He didn't approve of non-Chronos attempting his work. They had managed to maintain the job's mysticism for over five decades with the wages to suit; have-a-go heroes could only serve to weaken people's undying trust in what they did. It wasn't a difficult job; it just took a long time. He had mended a similar rent in spacetime that had opened up in Weybridge's municipal park just between the floral clock and the bandstand. The job itself had taken ten minutes; he had simply walked in and stuck a tennis ball across the hole while outside seven months flashed by--seven months on double pay plus privileges, thank you very much.

The ChronoGuard operatives set up a large clock facing inward so any operatives within the field's influence would know what was happening. A similar clock on the back of the helicopter gave the officers outside a good idea of how slow time was running within.

After the motorcycle disappeared they waited another half-an-hour to see what would happen. They watched Bowden slowly rise and throw what appeared to be a basketball.

"Too late," murmured Rutter, having seen this sort of thing before. He ordered his men into action, and they were just starting to crank up the rotors of the helicopter when the darkness around the hole evaporated. The night slid back and a clear road confronted them. They could see the people in the green sedan get out and look around in amazement at the sudden day. A hundred yards farther on, the basketball had neatly blocked the tear and now stood trembling slightly in midair as the vortex behind the rip sucked at the ball. Within a minute the tear healed and the basketball dropped harmlessly to the asphalt, bouncing a few times before rolling to the side of the road. The sky was clear and there was no evidence that time wasn't the same as it had always been. But of the Datsun, the motorcyclist and the brightly painted sports car, there was no trace at all.

My car slid on and on. The motorway had been replaced by a swirling mass of light and color that had no meaning to either of us. Occasionally a coherent image would emerge from the murk and on several occasions we thought we had arrived back in a stable time, but

were soon whisked back into the vortex, the typhoon raging in our ears. The first occasion was on a road somewhere in the Home Counties. It looked like winter, and ahead of us a lime-green Austin Allegro estate pulled out from a slip road. I swerved and drove past at great speed, sounding my horn angrily. That image collapsed abruptly and fragmented itself into the dirty hold of a ship. The car was wedged between two packing cases, the closest of which was bound for Shanghai. The howl of the vortex had diminished, but we could hear a new roar, the roar of a storm at sea. The ship wallowed and Bowden and I looked at one another, unsure as to whether this was the end of the journey or not. The roaring sound grew as the dank hold folded back into itself and vanished, only to be replaced by a white hospital ward. The tempest subsided, the car's engine ticking over happily. In the only occupied bed there was a drowsy and confused woman with her arm in a sling. I knew what I had to say.

"Thursday--!" I shouted excitedly.

The woman in the bed frowned. She looked across at Bowden, who waved back cheerily.

"He didn't die!" I continued, saying now what I knew to be the truth. I could hear the tempest starting to howl again. It wouldn't be long before we were taken away.

"The car crash was a blind! Men like Acheron don't die that easily! Take the Litera Tec job in Swindon!"

The woman in the bed just had time to repeat my last word before the ceiling and floor opened up and we plummeted back into the maelstrom. After a dazzling display of colorful noise and loud light, the vortex slid back to be replaced by the parking lot of a motorway services somewhere. The tempest slowed and stopped.

"Is this it?" asked Bowden.

"I don't know."

It was night and the streetlamps cast an orange glow over the parking lot, the roadway shiny from recent rain. A car pulled in next to us; it was a large Pontiac containing a family. The wife was berating her husband for falling asleep at the wheel and the children were crying. It looked like it had been a near-miss.

"Excuse me!" I yelled. The man wound down his window.

"Yes?"

"What's the date?"

"The date?"

"It's July 8," replied the man's wife, shooting him and me an annoyed glance.

I thanked her and turned back to Bowden.

"We're three weeks in the past?" he queried.

"Or fifty-six weeks into the future."

"Or one hundred and eight."

"I'm going to find out where we are."

I turned off the ignition and got out. Bowden joined me as we walked toward the cafeteria. Beyond the building we could see the motorway, and beyond that the connecting bridge to the services on the opposite motorway.

Several tow trucks drove past us with empty cars hitched to the back of them.

"Something's not right."

"I agree," replied Bowden. "But what?"

Suddenly, the doors to the cafeteria burst open and a woman pushed her way out. She was carrying a gun and pushing a man in front of her, who stumbled as they hurried out. Bowden pulled me behind a parked van. We peered cautiously out and saw that the woman had unwelcome company; several men had appeared seemingly from nowhere and all of them were armed.

"What the?--" I whispered, suddenly realizing what was happening. "That's me!"

And so it was. I looked slightly older but it was definitely me. Bowden had noticed too.

"I'm not sure I like what you've done with your hair."

"You prefer it long?"

"Of course."

We watched as one of the three men told the other me to drop her gun. I-me-she said something we couldn't hear and then put her gun down, releasing her hold on the man, who was then grabbed roughly by one of the other men.

"What's going on?" I asked, thoroughly confused.

"We've got to go!" replied Bowden.

"And leave me like this?"

"Look."

He pointed at the car. It was shaking slightly as a localized gust of wind seemed to batter it.

"I can't leave her--me--in this predicament!"

But Bowden was pulling me toward the car, which was rocking more violently and starting to fade.

"Wait!"

I struggled free, pulled out my automatic and hid it behind one of the wheels of the nearest car, then ran after Bowden and leaped into the back of the Speedster. I was just in time. There was a bright flash and a peal of thunder and then silence. I opened an eye. It was daylight. I looked at Bowden, who had made it into the driver's seat. The motorway services car park had vanished and in its place was a

quiet country lane. The journey was over.

"You all right?" I asked.

Bowden felt the three-day stubble that had inexplicably grown on his chin.

"I think so. How about you?"

"As well as can be expected."

I checked my shoulder holster. It was empty.

"I'm bursting for a pee, though. I feel like I haven't gone for a week."

Bowden made a pained expression and nodded.

"I think I could say the same."

I nipped behind a wall. Bowden walked stiffly across to the other side of the road and relieved himself in the hedge.

"Where do you suppose we are?" I shouted to Bowden from behind the wall. "Or more to the point, when?"

"Car twenty-eight," crackled the wireless, "come in please."

"Who knows?" called out Bowden over his shoulder. "But if you want to try that again you can do it with someone else."

Much relieved, we reconvened at the car. It was a beautiful day, dry and quite warm. The smell of haymaking was in the air, and in the distance we could hear a tractor lumbering across a field.

"What was all that motorway services thing about?" asked Bowden. "Last Thursday or next Thursday?"

I shrugged.

"Don't ask me to explain. I just hope I got out of that jam. Those guys didn't look as though they were out collecting for the church fund."

"You'll find out."

"I guess. I wonder who that man was I was trying to protect?"

"Search me."

I sat on the hood and donned a pair of dark glasses. Bowden walked to a gate and looked over. In a dip in the valley was a village built of gray stone, and in the field a herd of cows was grazing peacefully.

Bowden pointed to a milestone he had found.

"That's a spot of luck."

The milestone told him we were six miles from Haworth.

I wasn't listening to him. I was now puzzling over seeing myself in the hospital bed. If I hadn't seen myself I wouldn't have gone to Swindon and if I hadn't gone to Swindon I wouldn't have been able to warn myself to go there. Doubtless it would make complete sense to my father, but I might well go nuts trying to figure it out.

"Car twenty-eight," said the wireless, "come in please."

I stopped thinking about it and checked the position of the sun.

"It's about midday, I'd say."

Bowden nodded agreement.

"Aren't we car twenty-eight?" he asked, frowning slightly. I picked up the mike.

"Car twenty-eight, go ahead."

"At last!" sounded a relieved voice over the speaker. "I have Colonel Rutter of the ChronoGuard who wants to speak to you."

Bowden walked over so he could hear better. We looked at each other, unsure of what was going to happen next; a chastisement or a heap of congratulations, or, as it turned out, both.

"Officers Next and Cable. Can you hear me?" said a deep voice over the wireless.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Where are you?"

"About six miles from Haworth."

"All the way up there, eh?" he guffawed. "Jolly good." He cleared his throat. We could sense it coming.

"Unofficially, that was one of the bravest acts I've ever seen. You saved a great number of lives and stopped the event from becoming a matter of some consequence. You can both be very proud of your actions and I would be honored to have two fine officers like you serving under me."

"Thank you, sir, I--"

"I'm still talking!" he snapped, causing us both to jump. "*Officially*, though, you broke every rule in the book. And I should have both your butts nailed to the wall for not following procedure. If you ever try anything like this again, I most certainly will. Understand?"

"Understood, sir."

I looked at Bowden. There was only one question we wanted to ask.

"How long have we been gone?"

"The year is now 2016," said Rutter. "*You've been gone thirty-one years!!*"

## 28.

### Haworth House

Some would say the ChronoGuard have a terrific sense of humor. I would say they were just plain annoying. I had heard that they used to bundle up new recruits in gravity suits and pop them a week into the future just for fun. The game was banned when one recruit vanished outside the cone. Theoretically he is still there, just outside our time, unable to return and unable to communicate. It is calculated we will catch up with him about fourteen thousand years from now--sadly, he will have aged only twelve minutes. Some joke.

THURSDAY NEXT

--*A Life in SpecOps*

**WE** WERE both victims of the ChronoGuard's bizarre sense of humor. It was just past noon the following day. We had been gone only seven hours. We both reset our watches and drove slowly into Haworth, each sobered by the experience.

At Haworth House a full media circus was in progress. I had hoped to arrive before this sort of thing really gained a toehold, but the hole in the M1 had put paid to that. Lydia Startright from the Toad News Network had arrived and was recording for the lunchtime bulletin. She stood outside the steps of Haworth House with a microphone and composed herself before beginning. She signaled to her cameraman to roll, adopted one of her most serious expressions, and began.

". . . As the sun rose over Haworth House this morning the police began to investigate a bold theft and double murder. Some time last night a security guard was shot dead by an unknown assailant as he attempted to stop him stealing the original manuscript of *Jane Eyre*. Police have been at the crime scene since early morning and have as yet given no comment. It is fairly certain that parallels must be drawn with the theft of the *Martin Chuzzlewit* manuscript, which, despite continued police and SpecOps efforts, has so far not come to light. Following Mr. Quaverley's extraction and murder, it can only be surmised that a similar fate is in store for Rochester or Jane. The Goliath Corporation, whose presence this morning was an unusual development, have no comment to make--as usual."

"And--*cut!* That was *very* good, darling," declared Lydia's producer. "Can we do it once more without the reference to Goliath? You know they'll only cut it out!"

"Then let them."

"Lyds, baby--! Who pays the bills? I like free speech as much as the next man, but on someone else's airtime, hmm?"

She ignored him and looked around as a car arrived. Her face lit up and she walked briskly across, gesturing for her cameraman to follow.

A lean officer of about forty with silver hair and bags under his eyes looked to heaven as she approached, cracking his unfriendly face into a smile. He waited patiently for her to make a brief introduction.

"I have with me Detective Inspector Oswald Mandias, Yorkshire CID. Tell me, Inspector, do you think this crime is in any way connected to the *Chuzzlewit* theft?"

He smiled benignly, fully aware that he would be on thirty million television screens by the evening.

"It's far too early to say anything; a full press release will be issued in due course."

"Isn't this a case for the Yorkshire Litera Tecs, sir? *Jane Eyre* is one of this county's most valued treasures."

Mandias stopped to face her.

"Unlike other SpecOps departments, the Yorkshire LiteraTecs rely on evidence supplied by the regular police. Litera Tecs are *not* police and have no place in a police environment."

"Why do you suppose the Goliath Corporation made an appearance this morning?"

"No more questions!" called out Mandias's deputy as a throng of other news crews started to converge. Goliath had been and gone but no one was going to learn anymore about it. The police pushed their way past and Lydia stopped to have a snack; she had been reporting live since before breakfast. A few minutes later Bowden and I drove up in the Speedster.

"Well, well," I muttered as I got out of the car, "Startright keeps herself busy. Morning, Lyds!"

Lydia almost choked on her SmileyBurger and quickly threw it aside. She picked up her microphone and chased after me.

"Although the Yorkshire Litera Tecs and Goliath are claimed not to be present," muttered Lydia as she tried to keep up, "events have taken an interesting turn with the arrival of Thursday Next of SO-27. In a departure from normal procedure, the Litera Tecs have come out from behind their desks and are visiting the crime scene in person."

I stopped to have some fun. Lydia composed herself and started the interview.

"Miss Next, tell me, what are you doing so far out of your jurisdiction?"

"Hi, Lydia. You have mayonnaise on your upper lip from that SmileyBurger. It has a lot of salt in it and you really shouldn't eat them. As for the case, I'm afraid it's the same old shit: 'You will

understand that anything we may discover will have to remain a blah-de-blah-de-blah.' How's that?"

Lydia hid a smile.

"Do you think the two thefts are linked?"

"My brother Joffy is a big fan of yours, Lyds; can you let me have a signed picture? 'Joffy' with two Fs. Excuse me."

"Thanks for nothing, Thursday!" called out Startright. "I'll be seeing you!"

We walked up to the police line and showed our IDs to the constable on duty. He looked at the badges, then at the two of us. We could see he was not impressed. He spoke to Mandias.

"Sir, these two Wessex LiteraTecs want to get at the crime scene."

Mandias ambled over painfully slowly. He looked us both up and down and chose his words with care.

"Here in Yorkshire Litera Tecs don't leave their desks."

"I've read the arrest reports. It shows," I replied coldly.

Mandias sighed. Keeping what he described as eggheads in check, especially those from another SpecOps region, was obviously not something he was keen to do.

"I have two murders on my hands here and I don't want the crime scene disturbed. Why don't you wait until you get the report and then take your investigation from there?"

"The murders are tragic, obviously," I replied, "but *Jane Eyre* is the thing here. It is imperative that we get to see the crime scene. *Jane Eyre* is bigger than me and bigger than you. If you refuse I'll send a report to your superior officer complaining of your conduct."

But Mandias was not a man to listen to threats, idle or otherwise. This was Yorkshire, after all. He stared at me and said softly:

"Do your worst, pen-pusher."

I took a step forward and he bridled slightly; he wasn't going to give way. A nearby officer moved in behind him to give assistance if needed.

I was about to lose my temper when Bowden spoke up.

"Sir," he began, "if we could *move slowly* toward a goal we might be able to *burrow* our way out of the predicament we find ourselves *shuffling* into."

Mandias's attitude abruptly changed and he smiled solemnly.

"If *that* is the case, I am sure we could manage a quick look for you--as long as you promise not to touch anything."

"On my word," replied Bowden pointedly, patting his stomach. The two of them shook hands and winked and we were soon escorted into the museum.

"How the hell did you do that?" I hissed.

"Look at his ring."



I looked. He had a large ring on his middle finger with a curious and distinctive pattern on it.

"What of it?"

"The Most Worshipful Brotherhood of the Wombat."

I smiled.

"So what have we got?" I asked. "A double murder and a missing script? They just took the manuscript, right? Nothing else?"

"Right," replied Mandias.

"And the guard was shot with his own gun?"

Mandias stopped and looked sternly at me.

"How did you know that?"

"A lucky guess," I replied evenly. "What about the videotapes?"

"We're studying them at the moment."

"There's no one on them, is there?"

Mandias looked at me curiously.

"Do you know who did this?"

I followed him into the room that once held the manuscript. The untouched glass case was sitting forlornly in the middle of the floor. I ran my fingertips across a mottled and uneven patch on the glass.

"Thanks, Mandias, you're a star," I said, walking back out. Bowden and Mandias looked at one another and hastened after me.

"That's it?" said Mandias. "That's your investigation?"

"I've seen all I need to see."

"Can you give me anything?" asked Mandias, trotting to keep up. He looked at Bowden. "Brother, *you* can tell me."

"We should tell the DI what we know, Thursday. We owe him for allowing us in."

I stopped so suddenly Mandias almost bumped into me.

"Ever hear of a man named Hades?"

Mandias went visibly pale and looked around nervously.

"Don't worry; he's long gone."

"They say he died in Venezuela."

"They say he can walk through walls," I countered. "They also say he gives off colors when he moves. Hades is alive and well and I have to find him before he starts to make use of the manuscript."

Mandias seemed to have undergone a humbling change as soon as he realized who was behind it all.

"Anything I can do?"

I paused for a moment.

"Pray you never meet him."

The drive back to Swindon was uneventful, the area on the M1 where all the trouble had been now back to normal. Victor was waiting for us in the office; he seemed slightly agitated.

"I've had Braxton on the phone all morning bleating on about insurance cover being inoperative if his officers act outside their jurisdiction."

"Same old shit."

"That's what I told him. I've got most of the office reading *Jane Eyre* at the moment in case anything unusual happens--all quiet so far."

"It's only a matter of time."

"Hmm."

"Muller mentioned Hades being at Penderyn somewhere," I said to Victor. "Anything come of that?"

"Nothing that I know of. Schitt said he had looked into it and drawn a blank--there are over three hundred possible Penderyns that Muller might have meant. More worrying, have you seen this morning's paper?"

I hadn't. He showed me the inside front page of *The Mole*. It read:

#### TROOP MOVEMENTS NEAR WELSH BORDER

I read on with some alarm. Apparently there had been troop movements near Hereford, Chepstow and the disputed border town of Oswestry. A military spokesman had dismissed the maneuvers as simple "exercises," but it didn't sound good at all. Not at all. I turned to Victor.

"Jack Schitt? Do you think he wants the Prose Portal badly enough to go to war with Wales?"

"Who knows what power the Goliath Corporation wields. He might not be behind this at all. It could be coincidence or just saber-rattling; but in any event I don't think we can ignore it."

"Then we need to steal a march. Any ideas?"

"What did Muller say again?" asked Finisterre.

I sat down.

"He screamed: 'He's at Penderyn'; nothing else."

"Nothing else?" asked Bowden.

"No; when Schitt asked him *which* Penderyn he meant, as there must be hundreds, Muller told him to guess."

Bowden spoke up.

"What were his *precise* words?"

"He said 'Guess,' then repeated it but it turned into a yell-- he was in grave pain at the time. The conversation was recorded but there is about as much chance as getting hold of that as--"

"Maybe he meant something else."

"Like what, Bowden?"

"I really only speak tourist Welsh but 'Gwesty' means hotel."

"Oh my God," said Victor.

"Victor?" I queried, but he was busy rummaging in a large pile of

maps we had accumulated; each of them had a Pen-deryn of some sort marked on it. He spread a large street plan of Merthyr Tydfil out on the table and pointed at a place just between the Palace of justice and Government House. We craned to see where his finger was pointing but the location was unmarked.

"The Penderyn Hotel," announced Victor grimly. "I spent my honeymoon there. Once the equal of the Adelphi or Raffles, it's been empty since the sixties. If *I* wanted a safe haven--"

"He's there," I announced, looking at the map of the Welsh capital city uneasily. "That's where we'll find him."

"And how do you suppose we'll manage to enter Wales undetected, make our way into a heavily guarded area, snatch My-croft and the manuscript and get out in one piece?" asked Bowden. "It takes a month to even get a visa!"

"We'll find a way in," I said slowly.

"You're crazy!" said Victor. "Braxton would never allow it!"

"That's where you come in."

"Me? Braxton doesn't listen to *me*."

"I think he's about to start."

*Jane Eyre*

*Jane Eyre* was published in 1847 under the pseudonym Currer Bell, a suitably neuter name that disguised Charlotte Brontë's sex. It was a great success; William Thackeray described the novel as "The master work of a great genius." Not that the book was without its critics: G. H. Lewes suggested that Charlotte should study Austen's work and "correct her shortcomings in the light of that great artist's practice." Charlotte replied that Miss Austen's work was barely--in the light of what she wanted to do--a novel at all. She referred to it as "a highly cultivated garden with no open country." The jury is still out.

W.H.H.F.RENOUF

--*The Brontës*

HOBBS SHOOK his head in the relative unfamiliarity of the corridors of Rochester's home, Thornfield Hall. It was night and a deathly hush had descended on the house. The corridor was dark and he fumbled for his torch. A glimmer of orange light stabbed the darkness as he walked slowly along the upstairs hall. Ahead of him he could see a door which was slightly ajar, through which showed a thin glimmer of candlelight. He paused by the door and peered around the corner. Within he could see a woman dressed in tatters and with wild unkempt hair pouring oil from a lantern onto the covers under which Rochester lay asleep. Hobbes got his bearings; he knew that Jane would soon be in to put out the fire, but from which door he had no way of knowing. He turned back into the corridor and nearly leaped out of his skin as he came face to face with a large, florid-looking woman. She smelled strongly of drink, had an aggressive countenance and glared at him with thinly disguised contempt. They stood staring at each other for some moments, Hobbes wondering what to do and the woman wavering slightly, her eyes never leaving his. Hobbes panicked and went for his gun, but with wholly unlikely speed the woman caught his arm and held it pinched so tightly that it was all he could do to stop yelling out in pain.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed, one eyebrow twitching.

"Who in Christ's name are you?" asked Hobbes.

She smacked him hard across the face; he staggered before recovering.

"My name is Grace Poole," said Grace Poole. "In service I might be, but you have no right to utter the Lord's name in vain. I can see by your attire that you do not belong here. What do you want?"

"I'm, um, with Mr. Mason," he stammered.

"Rubbish," she replied, staring at him dangerously.

"I want Jane Eyre," he stammered.

"So does Mr. Rochester," she replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "But he doesn't even kiss her until page one hundred and eighty-one."

Hobbes glanced inside the room. The madwoman was now dancing around, smiling and cackling as the flames grew higher on Rochester's bed.

"If she doesn't arrive soon, there won't be a page one hundred and eighty-one."

Grace Poole caught his eye again and fixed him with a baleful glare.

"She will save him as she has before thousands of times, as she will again thousands of times. It is the way of things here."

"Yeah?" replied Hobbes. "Well, things just might change."

At that moment the madwoman rushed out of the room and into Hobbes with her fingernails outstretched. With a maniacal laugh that made his ears pop she lunged at him and pressed her uncut and ragged nails into both his cheeks. He yelled out in pain as Grace Poole wrestled Mrs. Rochester into a half nelson and frogmarched her to the attic. As Grace got to the door she turned to Hobbes and spoke again.

"Just remember: It is the way of things here."

"Aren't you going to try and stop me?" asked Hobbes in a puzzled tone.

"I take poor Mrs. Rochester upstairs now," she replied. "It is written."

The door closed behind her as a voice shouting "Wake, wake!" brought Hobbes's attention back to the blazing room. Within he could see the night-robed Jane throwing a jug of water over the recumbent form of Rochester. Hobbes waited until the fire was out before stepping into the room, drawing his gun as he did so. They both looked up, the "elves of Christendom" line dying on Rochester's lips.

"Who are you?" they asked, together.

"Believe me, you couldn't possibly begin to understand."

Hobbes took Jane by the arm and dragged her back toward the corridor.

"Edward! My Edward!" implored Jane, her arms outstretched to Rochester. "I won't leave you, my love!"

"Wait a minute," said Hobbes, still backing away, "you guys haven't fallen in love yet!"

"In that you would be mistaken," murmured Rochester, pulling out a percussion pistol from beneath his pillow. "I have suspected something like this might happen for some time." He aimed at Hobbes and fired in a single quick movement. He missed, the large lead ball burying itself in the door frame. Hobbes fired back a warning shot; Hades had expressly forbidden anyone in the novel to be hurt. Rochester pulled a

second pistol after the first and cocked it.

"Let her go," he announced, his jaw set, his dark hair falling into his eyes.

Hobbes pulled Jane in front of him.

"Don't be a fool, Rochester! If all goes well Jane will be returned to you forthwith; you won't even know she has gone!"

Hobbes backed down the hall toward where the portal was due to open as he spoke. Rochester followed, gun outstretched, his heart heavy as his one and only true love was dragged unceremoniously from the novel to that place, that *other* place, where he and Jane could never enjoy the life they enjoyed at Thornfield. Hobbes and Jane vanished back through the portal, which closed abruptly after them. Rochester put up his gun and glowered.

A few moments later Hobbes and a very confused Jane Eyre had fallen back through the Prose Portal and into the dilapidated smoking lounge of the old Penderyn Hotel.

Acheron stepped forward and helped Jane up. He offered her his coat to warm herself. After Thornfield Hall the hotel was decidedly drafty.

"Miss Eyre!--" announced Hades kindly. "My name is Hades, Acheron Hades. You are my respected guest; please take a seat and compose yourself."

"Edward?--"

"Quite well, my young friend. Come, let me take you to a warmer part of the hotel."

"Will I see my Edward again?"

Hades smiled.

"It rather depends on how valuable people think you are."

## A Groundswell of Popular Feeling

Until Jane Eyre was kidnapped I don't think anyone-- least of all Hades--realized quite how popular she was. It was as if a living national embodiment of England's literary heritage had been torn from the masses. It was the best piece of news we could have hoped for.

BOWDEN CABLE

--*Journal of a Litera Tec*

WITHIN TWENTY seconds of Jane's kidnapping, the first worried member of the public had noticed strange goings-on around the area of page 107 of their deluxe hidebound edition of *Jane Eyre*. Within thirty minutes all the lines into the English Museum library were jammed. Within two hours every LiteraTec department was besieged by calls from worried Bronte readers. Within four hours the president of the Bronte Federation had seen the prime minister. By suppertime the prime minister's personal secretary had called the head of SpecOps. By nine o'clock the head of SpecOps had batted it down the line to a miserable Braxton Hicks. By ten he had been called personally by the prime minister, who asked him what the hell he was going to do about it. He stammered down the line and said something wholly unhelpful. Meanwhile, the news was leaked to the press that Swindon was the center of the *Jane Eyre* investigation, and by midnight the SpecOps building was encircled by concerned readers, journalists and news network trucks.

Braxton was not in a good mood. He had started to chain-smoke and locked himself in his office for hours at a time. Not even putting practice managed to soothe his ruffled nerves, and shortly after the prime minister's call he summoned Victor and me for a meeting on the roof, away from the prying eyes of the press, the Goliath representatives and especially from Jack Schitt.

"Sir?" said Victor as we approached Braxton, who was leaning against a smokestack that squeaked as it turned. Hicks was staring out at the lights of Swindon with a detachment that made me worried. The parapet was barely two yards away, and for an awful moment I thought perhaps he was going to end it all.

"Look at them," he murmured.

We both relaxed as we realized that Braxton was on the roof so he could see the public that his department had pledged to help. There

were thousands of them, encircling the station behind crowd barriers, silently holding candles and clutching their copies of *Jane Eyre*, now seriously disrupted, the narrative stopping abruptly halfway down page 107 after a mysterious "Agent in black" enters Rochester's room following the fire.

Braxton waved his own copy of *Jane Eyre* at us.

"You've read it, of course?"

"There isn't much to read," Victor replied. "*Eyre* was written in the first person; as soon as the protagonist has gone, it's anyone's guess as to what happens next. My theory is that Rochester becomes even more broody, packs Adele off to boarding school, and shuts up the house."

Braxton looked at him pointedly.

"That's conjecture, Analogy."

"It's what we're best at."

Braxton sighed.

"They want me to bring her back and I don't even know where she is! Before all this happened, did you have any idea how popular *Jane Eyre* was?"

We looked at the crowd below.

"To be truthful, no."

Braxton's reserve was all gone. He wiped his brow; his hand was visibly shaking.

"What am I going to do? This is off the record but Jack Schitt takes over in a week if this whole stinking matter hasn't made any favorable headway."

"Schitt isn't interested in Jane," I said, following Braxton's gaze over the mass of Bronte fans. "All he wants is the Prose Portal."

"Tell me about it, Next. I've got seven days to obscurity and historical and literary damnation. I know we've all had our differences in the past, but I want to give you the freedom to do what you need to do. And," he added magnanimously, "this is irrespective of cost." He checked himself and added: "But having said that, of course, don't just spend money like water, okay?"

He looked at the lights of Swindon again.

"I'm as big a fan of the Brontes as the next man, Victor. What will you have me do?"

"Agree to his terms whatever they are; keep our movements completely and utterly secret from Goliath; and I need a manuscript."

Braxton narrowed his eyes.

"What sort of manuscript?"

Victor handed him a scrap of paper. Braxton read it and raised his eyebrows.

"I'll get it," he said slowly, "even if I have to steal it myself!"



## 31.

### The People's Republic of Wales

Ironically, without the efficient and violent crushing of the simultaneous Pontypool, Cardiff and Newport risings in 1839, Wales might never have been a republic at all. Under pressure from landowners and a public outcry at the killing of 236 unarmed Welsh men and women, the Chartists managed to push the government to early reform of the parliamentary system. Buoyed by success and well represented in the house, they succeeded in securing Welsh home rule following the eight-month "Great Strike" of 1847. In 1854, under the leadership of John Frost, Wales declared its independence. England, weighed down with troubles in the Crimea and Ireland, saw no good reason to argue with a belligerent and committed Welsh assembly. Trade links were good and devolution, coupled with an Anglo-Welsh nonaggression treaty, was passed the following year.

FROM ZEPHANIA JONES'S  
*Wales--Birth of a Republic*

WHEN THE Anglo-Welsh border was closed in 1965, the A4 from Chepstow to Abertawe became an access corridor through which only businessmen or truck drivers were allowed to pass, either to conduct trade in the city or to pick up goods from the docks. On either side of the Welsh A4 there were razor-wire fences to remind visitors that straying from the designated route was not permitted.

Abertawe was considered an open city--a "free trade zone." Tax was low and trade tariffs almost nonexistent. Bowden and I drove slowly into the city, the glassy towers and global banking institutions that lined the coast obvious testament to a free trade philosophy that, while profitable, was *not* enthusiastically promoted by all the Welsh people. The rest of the Republic was much more reserved and traditional; in places the small nation had hardly changed at all over the past hundred years.

"What now?" asked Bowden as we parked in front of the Goliath First National Bank. I patted the briefcase Braxton had given me the night before. He had told me to use the contents wisely; the way things were going this was about the last chance we had before Goliath stepped in.

"We get a lift into Merthyr."

"You wouldn't suggest it unless you had a plan."

"I wasn't wasting my time when I was in London, Bowden. I've got a few favors up my sleeve. This way."

We walked up the road, past the bank and into a side street that was lined with shops dealing in banknotes, medals, coins, gold--and

books. We squeezed past the traders, who conversed mostly in Welsh, and stopped outside a small antiquarian bookshop whose window was piled high with ancient volumes of forgotten lore. Bowden and I shared an anxious look and, taking a deep breath, I opened the door and we entered.

A small bell tinkled at the back of the shop and a tall man with a stoop came out to greet us. He looked at us suspiciously from between a shock of gray hair and a pair of half-moon spectacles, but the suspicion turned to a smile when he recognized me.

"Thursday, *bach!*" he murmured, hugging me affectionately. "What brings you out this way? Not all the way to Abertawe to see an old man, surely?"

"I need your help, Dai," I said softly. "Help like I've never needed before."

He must have been following the news broadcasts because he fell silent. He gently took an early volume of R. S. Thomas out of the hands of a prospective customer, told him it was closing time and ushered him out of the bookshop before he had time to complain.

"This is Bowden Cable," I explained as the bookseller bolted the door. "He's my partner; if you can trust me you can trust him. Bowden, this is Jones the Manuscript, my Welsh contact."

"Ah!" said the bookseller, shaking Bowden's hand warmly. "Any friend of Thursday's is a friend of mine. This is Haelwyn the Book," he added, introducing us to his assistant, who smiled shyly. "Now, young Thursday, what can I do for you?"

I paused.

"We need to get to Merthyr Tydfil--"

The bookseller laughed explosively.

"--tonight," I added.

He stopped laughing and walked behind the counter, tidying absently as he went.

"Your reputation precedes you, Thursday. They tell me you seek *Jane Eyre*. They say you have a good heart--and have faced wickedness and lived."

"What else do people say?"

"That Darkness walks in the valleys," interrupted Haelwyn with a good deal of doom in her voice.

"Thank you, Haelwyn," said Jones. "The man you seek--"

"--and the Rhondda has lain in shadow these past few weeks," continued Haelwyn, who obviously hadn't finished yet.

"That's enough, Haelwyn," said Jones more sternly. "There are some new copies of *Cold Comfort Farm* that need to be dispatched to Llan-dod, hmm?"

Haelwyn walked off with a pained expression.

"What about--" I began.

"--and the milk is delivered sour from the cows' udders!" called Haelwyn from behind a bookshelf. "And the compasses in Merthyr have all gone mad these past few days!"

"Take no heed of her," explained Jones apologetically. "She reads a lot of books. But how can I help you? Me, an old bookseller with no connections?"

"An old bookseller with Welsh citizenship and free access across the border doesn't need connections to get to where he wants to go."

"Wait a moment, Thursday, bach; you want *me* to take *you* to Merthyr?"

I nodded. Jones was the best and last chance I had, all rolled into one. But he wasn't as happy with the plan as I thought he might be.

"And why would I want to do that?" he asked sharply. "You know the punishment for smuggling? Want to see an old man like me end my days in a cell on Skokholm? You ask too much. I'm a crazy old man--not a stupid one."

I had thought he might say this.

"If you'll help us," I began, reaching into my briefcase, "I can let you have . . . *this*."

I placed the single sheet of paper on the counter in front of him; Jones gave a sharp intake of breath and sat heavily on a chair. He knew what it was without close examination.

"How . . . how did you get this?" he asked me suspiciously.

"The English government rates the return of *Jane Eyre* very highly--high enough to wish to trade."

He leaned forward and picked up the sheet. There, in all its glory, was an early handwritten draft of "I See the Boys of Summer," the opening poem in the anthology that would later become *18 Poems*, the first published work of Dylan Thomas; Wales had been demanding its return for some time.

"This belongs not to one man but to the Republic," announced the bookseller slowly. "It is the heritage."

"Agreed," I replied. "You can do with the manuscript what you will."

But Jones the Manuscript was not going to be swayed. I could have brought him *Under Milk Wood* and Richard Burton to read it and he *still* wouldn't have taken us to Merthyr.

"Thursday, you ask too much!" he wailed. "The laws here are *very* strict! The HeddluCyfrinach have eyes and ears everywhere!--"

My heart sank.

"I understand, Jones--and thanks."

"I'll take you to Merthyr, Miss Next," interrupted Haelwyn, fixing me with a half-smile.

"It is too dangerous," muttered Jones. "I forbid it!"

"Hush!" replied Haelwyn. "Enough of that talk from you. I read adventures every day--now I can be in one. Besides--the streetlights dimmed last night; *it was a sign!*"

We sat in Jones's parlor until it was dark, then spent a noisy and uncomfortable hour in the trunk of Haelwyn the Book's Griffin-12 motorcar. We heard the murmur of Welsh voices as she took us across the border and we were pummeled mercilessly by the potholed road on the trip into Merthyr. There was a second checkpoint just outside the capital, which was unusual; it seemed that English troop movements had made the military edgy. A few minutes later the car stopped and the trunk creaked open. Haelwyn bade us jump out and we stretched painfully after the cramped journey. She pointed the way to the Penderyn Hotel and I told her that if we weren't back by daybreak we wouldn't be coming. She smiled and shook our hands, wished us good luck and headed off to visit her aunt.

Hades was in the Penderyn Hotel's abandoned bar at that time, smoking a pipe and contemplating the view from the large windows. Beyond the beautifully lit Palace of Justice the full moon had risen and cast a cool glow upon the old city, which was alive with lights and movement. Beyond the buildings were the mountains, their summits hidden in cloud. Jane was on the other side of the room, sitting on the edge of her seat, angrily glaring at Hades.

"Pleasant view, wouldn't you say, Miss Eyre?"

"It pales when compared to my window at Thornfield, Mr. Hades," replied Jane in a restrained tone. "While not the finest view I had learned to love it as an old friend, dependable and unchanging. I demand that you return me there forthwith."

"All in good time, dear girl, all in good time. I mean you no harm. I just want to make a lot of money, then you can return to your Edward."

"Greed will get the better of you, I think, sir," responded Jane evenly. "You may think it will bring you happiness, but it will not. Happiness is fed by the food of love, not by the stodgy diet of money. The love of money is the root of all evil!"

Acheron smiled.

"You are so dull, you know, Jane, with that puritanical streak. You should have gone with Rochester when you had the chance instead of wasting yourself with that drip St. John Rivers."

"Rivers is a fine man!" declared Jane angrily. "He has more goodness than you will ever know!"

The telephone rang and Acheron interrupted her with a wave of his hand. It was Delamare, speaking from a phone box in Swindon. He was reading from *The Mole's* classified section.

"Lop-eared rabbits will be available soon to good homes," he quoted down the line. Hades smiled and replaced the receiver. The authorities, he thought, were playing ball after all. He motioned to Felix8, who followed him out of the room, dragging a recalcitrant Jane with him.

Bowden and I had forced a window in the dark bowels of the hotel and found ourselves in the old kitchen: a damp and dilapidated room packed with large food preparation equipment.

"Where now?" hissed Bowden.

"Upstairs--I would expect them to be in a ballroom or something."

I snapped on a flashlight and looked at the hastily sketched plans. Searching for the real blueprints would have been too risky with Goliath watching our every move, so Victor had drawn the basic layout of the building from memory. I pushed open a swing door and we found ourselves on the lower ground floor. Above us was the entrance lobby. By the glimmer of the streetlights that shone through the dirty windows we made our way carefully up the water-stained marble staircase. We were close; I could sense it. I pulled out my automatic and Bowden did the same. I looked up into the lobby. A brass bust of Y Brawd Ulyanov sat in pride of place in the large entrance hall opposite the sealed main doors. To the left was the entrance to the bar and restaurant, and to the right was the old reception desk; above us the grand staircase swept upstairs to the two ballrooms. Bowden tapped me on the shoulder and pointed. The doors to the main lounge were ajar, and a thin sliver of orange light shone from within. We were about to make a move when we heard footsteps from above. We pushed ourselves into the shadows and waited, breath bated. From the upstairs floor a small procession of people walked down the broad marble staircase. Leading the way was a man I recognized as Felix8; he held a candelabra aloft with one hand and clasped a small woman by the wrist with the other. She was dressed in Victorian night-clothes and had a greatcoat draped across her shoulders. Her face, although resolute, also spoke of despair and hopelessness. Behind her was a man who cast no shadows in the flickering light of the candles--Hades.

We watched as they entered the smoking lounge. We quickly tiptoed across the hall floor and found ourselves at the ornate door. I counted to three and we burst in.

"Thursday! My dear girl, how *predictable*!"

I stared. Hades was sitting in a large armchair, smiling at us. Mycroft and Jane were looking dejected on a chaise longue with

Felix8 behind them holding two machine pistols trained on Bowden and me. In front of them all was the Prose Portal. I cursed myself for being so stupid. I could sense Hades was here; did I suppose he could not do the same with me?

"Drop your weapons, please," said Felix8. He was too close to Mycroft and Jane to risk a shot; the last time we met he had died as I watched. I said the first thing that popped into my head.

"Haven't I seen your face somewhere before?"

He ignored me.

"Your guns, please."

"And let you shoot us like dodos? No way. We're keeping them."

Felix8 didn't move. Our weapons were by our side and his were pointing straight at us. It wouldn't be much of a contest.

"You seem surprised that I was expecting you," said Hades with a slight smile.

"You could say that."

"The stakes have changed, Miss Next. I thought my ten million ransom was a lot of money but I was approached by someone who would give me ten times that for your uncle's machine alone."

Mycroft shuffled unhappily. He had long ago ceased to complain, knowing it to be useless. He now looked forward only to the short visits he was permitted to Polly.

"If that is the case," I said slowly, "then you can return Jane to the book."

Hades thought for a minute.

"Why not? But first, I want you to meet someone."

A door opened to the left of us and Jack Schitt walked in. He was flanked by three of his men and they were all carrying plasma rifles. The situation, I noted, was on the whole less than favorable. I muttered an apology to Bowden then said:

"Goliath? Here, in Wales?"

"No doors are closed to the Corporation, Miss Next. We come and go as we please."

Schitt sat down on a faded red upholstered chair and pulled out a cigar.

"Siding with criminals, Mr. Schitt? Is that what Goliath does these days?"

"It's a relativist argument, Miss Next--desperate situations require desperate measures. I wouldn't expect you to understand. But listen, we have a great deal of money at our disposal and Acheron is willing to be generous in the use of Mr. Next's notable invention."

"And that is?"

"Ever seen one of these?" asked Schitt, waving the stubby weapon he held at us both.

"It's a plasma rifle."

"Correct. A one-man portable piece of field artillery, firing supercharged quanta of pure energy. It will cut through a foot of armor plate at a hundred yards; I think you will agree it is the high ground for land forces anywhere."

"If Goliath can deliver--" put in Bowden.

"It's a mite more complicated than that, Officer Cable," replied Schitt. "You see--*it doesn't work*. Almost a billion dollars of funding and the bloody thing doesn't work. Worse than that, it has recently been proved that it will *never* work; this sort of technology is *quite* impossible."

"But the Crimea is on the brink of war!" I exclaimed angrily. "What happens when the Russians realize that the new technology is all bluff?"

"But they won't," replied Schitt. "The technology might be impossible out here but it isn't impossible in *there*."

He patted the large book that was the Prose Portal and looked at Mycroft's genetically engineered bookworms. They were on rest & recuperation at present in their goldfish bowl; they had just digested a recent meal of prepositions and were happily farting out apostrophes and ampersands; the air was heavy with them&. Schitt held up a book whose title was clearly visible. It read: *The Plasma Rifle in War*. I looked at Mycroft, who nodded miserably.

"That's right, Mis's Next."

Schitt smiled & tapped the cover with the back of his hand.

"In he're the Plasma Rifle work's perfectly. All we ha've to do is open' the book with the Pros'e Portal, bring out the we'apons & is'sue them. It 's the ultimate weapon, Mis's' Next."

But he wasn't referring to the plasma rifle. He was pointing to the Prose Portal. The bookworms responded by belching out large quantities of unnecessary capitalizations.

"Any'thing That The Hu'man Imag'ination Can Think Up, We Can Reproduce. I Look At The Port'al as Les's Of A Gateway To A Million World's, But More Like A Three Dim'ensional P'hotocopier. With It We Can Ma'ke Anything We Want; Even Another Portal--a H&held Version. Chri'stmas Every Day, Miss Next."

"More Death In The Cr'imea; I Ho'pe You Can Sleep Well At Night, Schitt."

"On The Co'ntrary, Miss' Next. Russia Will Roll Over & Piss' Over Itself When It Witness'es The Power Of Stonk. The Czar Will Permanently Cede The Peninsula To England; a New Riviera, Won't That be nice?"

"Nice? Sun Lounger's & High-Rise Hotel's? Built On L& That Will Be Dem&ed Back Half a Century From Now? You're Not S'olving

Anything, Schitt, Merely Delaying It. When The Russian's Have a Plasma Rifle Of Their Own, Then What?"

Jack Schitt was unrepentant.

"Oh, Don't Worry About That, Miss Next, I'll Charge The'm *Twice* What I'll Charge The Eng'lish Gov'ernment!"

"Hear, Hear!" put in Hades, who was deeply impressed by Schitt's total absence of scruples so far.

"A Hundred Million' Dollars Fo'r The Portal, Thursday," added Hades excitedly, "& a 50% Cut On Every'thing That' Comes Out Of It!"

"A Lackey For The Goliath Corpor'ation, Acheron? That Doesn't Sound Like You At All."

Hades' cheek quivered but he fought it, answering:

"Out Of Small Acorn's, Thur'sday . . ."

Schitt looked at him suspiciously. He nodded to one of his men, who levelled a small anti-tank gun at Hades.

"Hade's, The Instructio'n Manual."

"Please!" pleaded Mycroft. "You're Upsetting The Wor'ms! They're Starting to hy-phe-nate!"

"Shut-up, My-croft," snapped Schitt. "Ha-de's, please, The In-Struc-tion Man-ual."

"Man-ual, My De'ar Chap?"

"Yes, Mr. Hade's. Ev-en You Will Not be Im-Pervious To My Associate's Small Artill-ery Piece. You Have My-croft's Manual For The Por-tal & The Po-em In Which You Have Im-pris-oned Mrs. Next. Give-Them-To-Me."

"No, Mr. Schitt. Give *Me* The Gun--"

But Schitt didn't flicker; the power that had stolen Snood and countless other people's reason had no effect on Schitt's dark soul. Hades' face fell. He had not come across someone like Schitt before; not since the first Felix, anyhow. He laughed.

"You Dare To Dou-ble--Cross-*Me*?"

"Sure I Do. If I Did-n't You'd Have No Res'-pect From Me & That's No Basis' For A Work-able Part-ner-ship."

Hades dodged in front of the Prose Portal.

"& To Think We Were All Get-t'ing A-long So Well, Too--!" he exclaimed, placing the original manuscript of *Jane Eyre* back into the machine and adding the bookworms, who settled down, stopped farting, belching and hyphenating and got to work.

"Really!" continued Hades. "I expected better from you, I must say. I almost thought I had found someone who could be a partner."

"But you'd want it all, Hades," replied Schitt. "Sooner or later and most probably sooner."

"True, very true."

Hades nodded to Felix8 who immediately started shooting. Bowden



and I were directly in his line of fire; there was no way he could miss. My heart leaped but strangely the first bullet slowed and stopped in midair three inches from my chest. It was the initial volley of a deadly procession that snaked lazily all the way back to Felix8's weapon, its muzzle now a frozen chrysanthemum of fire. I looked across at Bowden, who was also in line for a slug; the shiny bullet had stopped a foot from his head. But he was not stirring. Indeed, the whole room was not stirring. My father, for once, had arrived at precisely the *right* moment.

"Have I come at a bad time?" asked Dad, looking up from where he was sitting at the dusty grand piano. "I can go away again if you want."

"N-no, Dad, this is good, *real* good," I muttered.

I looked around the room. My father never stayed for longer than five minutes, and when he left the bullets would almost certainly carry onto their intended victim. My eyes alighted on a heavy table and I upended it, sending dust, debris and empty Leek-U-Like containers to the floor.

"Have you ever heard of someone named Winston Churchill?" asked my father.

"No; who's he?" I gasped as I heaved the heavy oak table in front of Bowden.

"Ah!" said my father, making a note in a small book. "Well, he was meant to lead England in the last war but I think he was killed in a fall as a teenager. It's *most* awkward."

"Another victim of the French revisionists?"

My father didn't answer. His attention had switched to the middle of the room, where Hades was working on the Prose Portal. Time, for men like Hades, rarely stood still.

"Oh, don't mind me!" said Hades as a shaft of light opened up in the gloom. "I'm just going to step inside until all this unpleasantness is over. I have the instruction manual and Polly, so we can still bargain."

"Who's that?" asked my father.

"Acheron Hades."

"Is it? I expected someone shorter."

But Hades had gone; the Prose Portal buzzed slightly and then closed after him.

"I've got some repairs to do," announced my father, getting up and closing his notebook. "Time waits for no man, as we say."

I just had time to duck behind a large bureau as the world started up again. The hail of lead from Felix8 struck the heavy oak table I had maneuvered in front of Bowden, and the bullets that had been destined for me thudded into the wooden door behind where I had

been standing. Within the space of two seconds the room was full of gunfire as the Goliath operatives joined in, covering Jack Schitt, who, perplexed that Hades had vanished in mid-sentence, was now beating a retreat to the door leading to the old Atlantic Grill. Mycroft threw himself to the floor followed closely by Jane as dust and debris were scattered about the room. I bellowed into Jane's ear to stay where she was as a shot came perilously close to our heads, knocking some molding off the furniture and showering us with dust. I crawled around to where I could see Bowden exchanging shots with Felix8, who was now trapped behind an upended mock-Georgian table next to the entrance of the Palm Court Tea Rooms. I had just loosed off a few shots at Goliath's men, who had rapidly dragged Schitt from the room, when the firing stopped as quickly as it had begun. I reloaded.

"Felix8!" I shouted. "You can still surrender! Your real name is Danny Chance. I promise you we will do all we can to--"

There was a strange gurgling noise and I peeked around the back of the sofa. I thought Felix8 had been wounded but he hadn't. He was laughing. His usually expressionless face was convulsed with mirth. Bowden and I exchanged quizzical looks--but we stayed hidden.

"What's so funny?" I yelled.

*"Haven't I seen your face somewhere before!"* he giggled. "I get it now!"

He raised his gun and fired repeatedly at us as he backed out of the lounge doors and into the darkness of the lobby outside. He had sensed his master's escape and had no more work to do here.

"Where's Hades?" said Bowden.

"In *Jane Eyre*," I replied, standing up. "Cover the portal-- and if he returns, use this."

I handed him the anti-tank weapon as Schitt, alerted to the end of the gunfire, returned. He appeared at the door to the bar.

"Hades?"

*"In Jane Eyre with the instruction manual."*

Schitt told me to surrender the Prose Portal to him.

"Without the instruction manual you've got nothing," I said. "Once I have Hades out of Thornfield and have returned my aunt to Mycroft you can have the manual. There is no other deal; that's it. I'm taking Jane back with me now."

I turned to my uncle.

"Mycroft, send us back to just *before* Jane comes out of her room to put out the fire in Rochester's bedroom. It will be as if she had never left. When I want to come back I'll send a signal. Can you do that?"

Schitt threw up his arms. "What sweet madness is this?" he cried.

"That's the signal," I said, "the words 'sweet madness.' As soon as you hear them, open the door immediately."

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" asked Bowden as I helped Jane to her feet.

"Never been more certain. Just don't turn the machine off; much as I enjoy the book I've no desire to stay there forever."

Schitt bit his lip. He had been outmaneuvered. His hand, such as it was, would have to be played upon my return.

I checked that my gun was still loaded, took a deep breath and nodded to Jane, who smiled back eagerly. We grasped each other's hands tightly and stepped through the doorway.

## 32.

### Thornfield Hall

It wasn't how I imagined it. I thought Thornfield Hall would be bigger and more luxuriously furnished. There was a strong smell of polish and the air was chill in the upstairs corridor. There was barely any light in the house and the corridors seemed to stretch away into inky blackness. It was dour and unappealing. I noticed all this but most of all I noticed the quiet; the quiet of a world free from flying machines, traffic and large cities. The industrial age had only just begun; the planet had reached its Best Before date.

THURSDAY NEXT

--*A Life in SpecOps*

I STAGGERED slightly as we made the jump; there had been a bright flash of light and a short blast of static. I found myself in the master bedroom corridor, a few lines above where Hobbes had taken Jane out. The fire was ablaze and Jane took her cue instinctively, opening the door and leaping into Rochester's room to pour a ewer full of water over the burning covers. I looked quickly around the dark corridor but of Hades there was no sign; at the far end I could just see Grace Poole escorting Bertha to her attic room. The madwoman looked back over her shoulder and smiled crazily. Grace Poole followed her gaze and glared disapprovingly at me. I suddenly felt very alien; this world was not mine and I didn't belong here. I stepped back as Jane rushed out of Rochester's room to fetch some more water; upon her face, I noted, was a look of great relief. I smiled and permitted myself a peek inside the bedroom. Jane had managed to extinguish the fire and Rochester was swearing at finding himself in a pool of water.

"Is there a flood?" he asked.

"No, sir," she replied, "but there has been a fire. Get up, do; you are quenched now. I will fetch you a candle."

Rochester caught sight of me at the door and winked before rapidly returning his features to a look of consternation.

"In the name of all the elves in Christendom," he asked, his eyes glistening at her return, "is that Jane Eyre? What have you done with me . . ."

I stepped outside the door, confident in the knowledge that back home the book would be starting to rewrite itself across the page. The reference to the "agent in black" would be over-written and with luck, and Hades willing, things could get back to normal. I picked up the

candle that had been left on the mat and relit it as Jane came out, smiled her thanks, took it from me and returned to the bedroom. I walked down the corridor, looked at a particularly fine Landseer painting and sat down upon a Regency chair, one of a pair. Although the house was not big, it afforded all sorts of hiding places for Acheron. I spoke his name to let him know I was about and heard a door slam somewhere in the house. I pulled open a shutter and saw the unmistakable figure of Hades walking rapidly across the lawn by the light of the moon. I watched his form fade into the shadows. He would be as good as safe in the countryside but I still had the upper hand. I knew how to reopen the door and he didn't; I thought it unlikely he would harm me. I sat down again and was just thinking about Daisy Mutlar and Landen when I drifted off to sleep. I was jolted awake as the door to Rochester's bedroom opened and the figure of Edward emerged. He was holding a candle and spoke to Jane at the door.

". . . I must pay a visit to the third story. Don't move, remember, or call anyone."

He padded softly down the corridor and hissed: "Miss Next, are you there?"

I stood up.

"Here, sir."

Rochester took me by the arm and led me along the gallery and onto the landing above the stairs. He stopped, placed the candle on a low table and clasped both my hands in his.

"I thank you, Miss Next, from the bottom of my heart! It has been a living hell of torment; not knowing when or even if my beloved Jane would return!"

He spoke with keen and very real passion; I wondered if Landen had ever loved me as much as Rochester loved Jane.

"It was the least I could do, Mr. Rochester," I responded happily, "after your kind attention to my wounds that night outside the warehouse."

He dismissed my words with a wave of his hand.

"You are returning straight away?"

I looked down.

"It's not quite as easy as that, sir. There is another interloper in this book aside from me."

Rochester strode to the balustrade. He spoke without turning around.

"It's *him*, isn't it?"

"You have met him?" I asked, surprised.

"He has several names. You have a plan?"

I explained the use of a signal and made it clear that it would be

safer for me to remain at Thornfield until the book had run its course. Then I would take Hades with me--somehow.

"The end of the book," murmured Rochester unhappily. "How I *hate* the ending. The thought of my sweet Jane traveling to India with that poltroon St. John Rivers makes my blood turn to ice." He bolstered himself. "But I have at least a few months of real happiness before that time. Come, you must be hungry." He walked off down the corridor and beckoned me to follow, talking as he went.

"I suggest we try and trap *him* when Jane has left after--" he shivered slightly at the thought of it. "--the wedding. We will be quite alone as Jane takes the narrative with her to Moor House and those fatuous cousins. I am not featured again in the book, so we may do as we please, and I am best disposed to be of assistance. However, as you have guessed, you must do nothing that might disturb Jane; this novel is written in the first person. I can get away to speak with you when I am, to all intents and purposes, out of the story. But you must promise me that you will stay out of Jane's way. I will speak to Mrs. Fairfax and Adele privately; they will understand. The servants Mary and John will do whatever I tell them."

We had arrived at a door and Rochester knocked impatiently. There was a groaning and a thump and presently a very disheveled character appeared at the door.

"Mrs. Fairfax," said Rochester, "this is Miss Next. She will be staying with us for a month or two. I want you to fetch her some food and have a bed made ready; she has traveled far to be here and I think she needs sustenance and rest. It would please me if you were not to discuss her presence with anyone, and I would be grateful if you could engineer that Miss Next and Miss Eyre do not meet. I hardly need to stress the importance of this to you."

Mrs. Fairfax looked me up and down, was particularly intrigued and shocked at the same time by my ponytail and jeans, and then nodded and led me off toward the dining room.

"We will speak again tomorrow, Miss Next," said Rochester, a smile breaking out on his troubled face. "And I thank you once again."

He turned and left me to Mrs. Fairfax, who bustled downstairs. The housekeeper told me to wait in the dining room while she brought me something to eat. She returned shortly with some cold cuts of meat and some bread. I ate hungrily as Pilot--who I thought had been let in when Hades went out--sniffed at my trouser leg and wagged his tail excitedly.

"He remembers you," remarked Mrs. Fairfax slowly, "yet I have been working here for many years and I do not recall having laid eyes upon you before."

I tickled Pilot's ear.

"I threw a stick for him once. When he was out with his master."

"I see," replied Mrs. Fairfax, suspiciously. "And how do you know Mr. Rochester?"

"I, ah, met the Rochesters in Madeira. I knew his brother."

"I see. *Very* tragic." Her eyes narrowed. "Then you know the Masons?"

"Not well."

She had been eyeing my jeans again.

"Women wear breeches where you come from?"

"Often, Mrs. Fairfax."

"And where is it that you come from? London?"

"Farther than that."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Fairfax with a knowing smile. "Osaka!"

She bustled out, leaving me alone with Pilot, having made me promise that I would not feed him from the table. She returned ten minutes later with a tray of tea things, then left me for another half hour to make up a room. She led me up to a second-story chamber with a fine view out of the front of the house. I had insisted that Pilot stay with me, and he slept against the locked door, somehow sensing the possible danger that his new mistress might be in. I slept fitfully and dreamed of Hades laughing at me.

As I slept, Victor and the others back at the Swindon Litera Tec office had been celebrating the return of the narrative to the novel. Apart from a brief mention of Mrs. Fairfax making noises on the night of the bedroom fire, it was all pretty much as anyone remembered it. A member of the Bronte Federation had been called in to examine the text as it wrote itself across the last two hundred pages, which up until this moment had been blank. The Bronte scholar knew the book by heart and his pleased expression gave them no cause for complaint.

I woke to the sound of Pilot scratching on the door to be let out. I quietly unlocked it and peeped out. I could see Jane bustling down the corridor and quickly shut the door and looked at my watch. It was barely 6 A.M. and only a few of the domestic staff were awake. I waited a couple of minutes, let Pilot out and then followed, cautious lest I bumped into Jane. The morning was spent with almost everyone in the house setting Rochester's room to rights, so after breakfast I was about to make my way out of the house when Mrs. Fairfax stopped me.

"Miss Next," announced the housekeeper, "Mr. Rochester has explained to me about the events of the past week and I wanted to add my thanks to his."

She said it without emotion but I was in no doubt that she meant it. She added:

"He has instructed me to have the house guarded against agents who would wish Miss Eyre harm."

I looked out of the window; from where we stood I could see an estate worker standing on sentry duty with a large pickaxe handle. As we watched he glanced into the house and scurried out of sight. A few moments later Jane herself walked out of the door, looked about her, took a deep breath in the crisp morning air, and then went back inside. After a few moments the estate worker reappeared and took up his post once more.

"Miss Eyre must never know we are watching and guarding her," said Mrs. Fairfax severely.

"I understand."

Mrs. Fairfax nodded and looked at me critically.

"Do women go about with their heads uncovered where you come from?"

"Frequently."

"It isn't the accepted thing *here*," she said reproachfully. "Come with me and I shall make you presentable."

Mrs. Fairfax took me to her own room and gave me a bonnet to wear along with a thick black cloak that covered me to my feet. I thanked her and Mrs. Fairfax bobbed courteously.

"Is Mr. Rochester at home today?" I asked.

"He has gone to make arrangements. I understand he went to Mr. Eshton's place; there is quite a party going on. Colonel Dent will be there as well as Lord Ingram. I don't expect him back for a week."

"With all that is going on here, do you think it is wise?"

Mrs. Fairfax looked at me as though I were an infant.

"You don't understand, do you? After the fire Mr. Rochester goes away for a week. That's how it happens."

I wanted to ask more but the housekeeper excused herself and I was left alone. I collected my thoughts, smoothed the cloak and went outside to walk around the house, checking that everything was secure. All the estate workers nodded to me respectfully as I passed, each of them armed with a weapon of some sort. Hoping that none of them would have to face him, I walked across the lawn in the direction that Hades had taken the previous night. I was just passing the large beeches near the ha-ha when a familiar voice made me turn.

"Do we stand a chance against him?"

It was Rochester. He was standing behind one of the large tree trunks, looking at me with grave concern etched upon his face.

"Every chance, sir," I responded. "Without me he is trapped here; if he wants to return he *has* to negotiate."



"And where is he?"

"I was going to try the town. Aren't you meant to be at Mr. Eshton's?"

"I wanted to speak to you before I left. You will do all you can, won't you?"

I assured him that I would do everything in my power and then set off for the town.

Millcote was a good-sized town. I made my way to the center, where I found a church, a stagecoach stop, three inns, a bank, two draper's, a bagged-goods merchant and assorted other trades. It was market day and the town was busy. No one gave me a second glance as I walked through the stalls, which were piled high with winter produce and game. Apart from the faint odor of ink that pervaded the scene, it might have been real. The first hostelry I chanced across was The George. Since it was actually named in the book I supposed it might offer the best chance.

I entered and asked the innkeeper whether a man of large stature had taken a room at the inn that morning. The landlord proclaimed that he had not but added that his was not the only inn in the town. I thanked him and walked to the door, but was arrested by the incongruous sound of a camera shutter. I slowly turned around. Behind me was a Japanese couple, dressed in period costume but with one of them holding a large Nikon camera. The woman hastily tried to conceal the blatant anachronism and started to drag the man out of the door.

"Wait!"

They stopped and looked nervously at one other.

"What are you doing here?" I asked incredulously.

"Visiting from Osaka," affirmed the woman, at which the man--he seemed not to speak English--nodded his head vigorously and started to consult a Bronte guidebook written in Japanese.

"How?--"

"My name is Mrs. Nakijima," announced the woman, "and this is Mr. Suzuki."

The man grinned at me and shook my hand excitedly.

"This is crazy!" I said angrily. "Are you trying to tell me that you two are *tourists*?"

"Indeed," admitted Mrs. Nakijima, "I make the jump once a year and bring a visitor with me. We touch nothing and never speak to Miss Eyre. As you can see, we are dressed fittingly."

"Japanese? In mid-nineteenth-century England?"

"Why not?"

Why not indeed.

"How do you manage it?"

The woman shrugged.

"I just *can*," she answered simply. "I think hard, speak the lines and, well, here I am."

I didn't have time for this at all.

"Listen to me. My name is Thursday Next. I work with Victor Analogy at the Litera Tec office in Swindon. You heard about the theft of the manuscript?"

She nodded her head.

"There is a dark presence in this book but my plan to extract him is dependent on there being only one way in and one way out. He will stop at nothing to use you to get out if he can. I implore you to jump back home while you still can."

Mrs. Nakijima consulted for some time with her client. She explained that Mr. Suzuki was hoping to see Jane if possible, but that if he were taken back now he would want a refund. I reiterated my position on the matter and they eventually agreed. I followed them to their room upstairs and waited while they packed. Mrs. Nakijima and Mr. Suzuki both shook me by the hand, held onto each other and evaporated. I shook my head sadly. It seemed there were very few places that the tourist business hadn't touched.

I left the warmth of the inn for the chill exterior and made my way past a stall selling late root vegetables and onto The Millcote, where I inquired about any new guests.

"And who would be wanting to see Mr. Hedge?" inquired the innkeeper, spitting into and then polishing a crude beer mug.

"Tell him Miss Next is here to see him."

The innkeeper vanished upstairs and returned presently.

"Room seven," he replied shortly, and returned to his duties.

Acheron was sitting by the window, his back to the door. He didn't move when I entered.

"Hello, Thursday."

"Mr. Hedge?"

"Locals in mid-nineteenth-century England are a superstitious lot. I thought Hades might seem a little strong for them."

He turned to face me, his piercing blue eyes seeming to look straight into me. But his power over me had waned; he could not read me as he had others. He sensed this immediately, gave a half-smile and resumed staring out of the window.

"You grow strong, Miss Next."

"I thrive on adversity."

He gave a short laugh.

"I should have made quite sure of you back at Styx's apartment."

"And spoiled all the fun? Your life would be considerably more dull

without me and the rest of SpecOps to louse it up."

He ignored me and changed the subject.

"Someone as resourceful as you would never have come in here without a way out. What is it, Thursday? A prearranged code to let Mycroft know when to open the door?"

"Something like that. If you give me the instruction manual and Polly I promise you shall have a fair trial."

Hades laughed.

"I think I am way beyond a fair trial, Thursday. I could kill you now and I feel a strong urge to do precisely that, but the prospect of being trapped in this narrative for all time bars me from that action. I tried to get to London but it's impossible; the only towns that exist in this world are the places that Charlotte Bronte wrote about and which feature in the narrative. Gateshead, Lowood--I'm surprised that there is even as much of *this* town. Give me the code word to get out and you can have the manual and Polly."

"No. You give me the manual and my aunt first."

"You see? Impasse. You'll want to wait until the book is written again, though, won't you?"

"Of course."

"Then you will expect no trouble from me until such time as Jane leaves Thornfield for good. After that, we negotiate."

"I won't negotiate, Hades."

Hades shook his head slowly.

"You'll negotiate, Miss Next. You may be disgustingly righteous but even you will balk at spending the rest of your life in here. You're an intelligent woman; I'm sure you'll think of something."

I sighed and walked back outside, where the bustle of the shoppers and traders was a welcome break from the dark soul of Hades.

## 33.

### The Book Is Written

From our position in the lounge of the Penderyn Hotel we could see Thursday's good work. The narrative continued rapidly; weeks passed in the space of a few lines. As the words wrote themselves back across the page they were read aloud by Mycroft or myself. We were all waiting for the phrase "sweet madness" to appear in the text, but it didn't. We prepared ourselves to assume the worst; that Hades was not caught and might never be. That Thursday might stay in the book as some sort of permanent caretaker.

From Bowden Cable's journal

**T**HE WEEKS passed rapidly at Thornfield and I busied myself with the task of making Jane secure without her ever knowing it. I had a young lad positioned at the Millcote to warn of Hades' movements, but he seemed quite happy just to go out walking every morning, borrow books from the local doctor, and spend his time at the inn. His inaction was a cause of some worry, but I was glad it was merely that for the time being.

Rochester had sent a note advising of his return and a party was arranged for local friends of his. Jane seemed to be severely agitated by the arrival of the airhead Blanche Ingram, but I gave it little heed. I was busy trying to arrange security with John, the cook's husband, who was a resourceful and intelligent man. I had taught him to shoot with Rochester's pistols and he was, I was delighted to find out, an excellent shot. I had thought that Hades might make an appearance with one of the guests but, apart from the arrival of Mr. Mason from the West Indies, nothing out of the ordinary occurred.

The weeks turned into months and I saw little of Jane--on purpose, of course--but kept in contact with the household and Mr. Rochester to make sure that all was going well. And it appeared that all *was* going well. As usual, Mr. Mason was bitten by his mad sister in the upper room; I was standing outside the locked door when Rochester went for the doctor and Jane tended to Mason's wounds. When the doctor arrived I kept watch in the arbor outside, where I knew Jane and Rochester would meet. And so it went on until a brief respite when Jane went away to visit her dying aunt in Gateshead. Rochester had decided to marry Blanche Ingram by this time and things had been slightly tense between him and Jane. I felt some relief that she was away; I could relax and talk to Rochester quite easily without Jane suspecting anything.

"You aren't sleeping," observed Rochester as we walked together on the front lawn. "Look how your eyes are dark-rimmed and languorous."

"I don't sleep well here, not while Hades is barely five miles distant."

"Your spies, surely, would alert you to any movement of his?"

It was true; the network worked well, although not without some considerable expenditure on Rochester's part. If Hades set off anywhere I knew about it within two minutes from a rider who stood by for just such an occasion. It was in this manner that I was able to find him when he was out, either walking or reading or beating peasants with his stick. He had never come within a mile of the house, and I was happy to keep it that way.

"My spies afford me peace of mind, but I still can't believe that Hades could be so passive. It chills and worries me."

We walked on for a while, Rochester pointing out places of interest to me around the grounds. But I was not listening.

"How did you come to me, that night outside the warehouse, when I was shot?"

Rochester stopped and looked at me.

"It just *happened*, Miss Next. I can't explain it anymore than you can explain arriving here when you were a little girl. Apart from Mrs. Nakijima and a traveler named Foyle, I don't know of anyone else who has done it."

I was surprised at this.

"You have met Mrs. Nakijima, then?"

"Of course. I usually do tours of Thornfield for her guests when Jane is up at Gateshead. It carries no risk and is extremely lucrative. Country houses are not cheap to run, Miss Next, even in this century."

I allowed myself a smile. I thought that Mrs. Nakijima must be making a very sizeable profit; it was, after all, the ultimate trip for a Bronte fan, and there were plenty of those in Japan.

"What will you do after this?" asked Rochester, pointing out a rabbit to Pilot, who barked and ran off.

"Back to SpecOps work, I guess," I replied. "What about you?"

Rochester looked at me broodingly, his eyebrows furrowed and a look of anger rising across his features.

"There is nothing for me after Jane leaves with that slimy and pathetic excuse for a vertebrate, St. John Rivers."

"So what will you do?"

"Do? I won't *do* anything. Existence pretty much ceases for me about then."

"Death?"

"Not as such," replied Rochester, choosing his words carefully. "Where you come from you are born, you live and then you die. Am I

correct?"

"More or less."

"A pretty poor way of living, I should imagine!" laughed Rochester. "And you rely upon that inward eye we call a memory to sustain yourself in times of depression, I suppose?"

"Most of the time," I replied, "although memory is but one hundredth of the strength of currently felt emotions."

"I concur. Here, I neither am born, nor die. I come into being at the age of thirty-eight and wink out again soon after, having fallen in love for the first time in my life and then lost the object of my adoration, my being! . . ."

He stopped and picked up the stick that Pilot had considerably brought him in place of the rabbit he couldn't catch.

"You see, I can move myself to anywhere in the book I wish at a moment's notice and back again at will; the greatest parts of my life lie between the time I profess my true love to that fine, impish girl and the moment the lawyer and that fool Mason turn up to spoil my wedding and reveal the madwoman in the attic. Those are the weeks to which I return most often, but I go to the bad times too--for without a yardstick sometimes the high points can be taken for granted. Sometimes I muse that I might have John stop them at the church gate and stall them until the wedding is over, but it is against the way of things."

"So while I am talking to you here--"

--"I am also meeting Jane for the first time, wooing her, then losing her forever. I can even see you now, as a small child, your expression of fear under the hooves of my horse--"

He felt his elbow.

"And feel the pain of the fall, too. So you see, my existence, although limited, is not without benefits."

I sighed. If only life were that simple; if one could jump to the good parts and flick through the bad--

"You have a man you love?" asked Rochester suddenly.

"Yes; but there is much bad air between us. He accused my brother of a crime that I thought unfair to lay upon the shoulders of a dead man; my brother never had a chance to defend himself and the evidence was not strong. I find it hard to forgive."

"What is there to forgive?" demanded Rochester. "Ignore forgive and concentrate on *living*. Life for you is short; far too short to allow small jealousies to infringe on the happiness which can be yours only for the briefest of times."

"Alas!" I countered. "He is engaged to be married!"

"And what of that?" scoffed Rochester. "Probably to someone as unsuitable for him as Blanche Ingram is for me!"

I thought about Daisy Mutlar and there did, indeed, seem to be a strong similarity.

We walked along together in silence until Rochester pulled out a pocket watch and consulted it.

"My Jane is returning from Gateshead as we speak. Where is my pencil and notebook?"

He rummaged within his jacket and produced a bound drawing-book and a pencil.

"I am to meet her as if by accident; she walks across the fields shortly in this direction. How do I look?"

I straightened his necktie and nodded my satisfaction.

"Do you think me handsome, Miss Next?" he asked quite suddenly.

"No," I answered truthfully.

"Bah!" exclaimed Rochester. "Pixies both! Begone with you; we will talk later!"

I left them to it and walked back to the house by way of the lake, deep in thought.

And so the weeks wore on, the air becoming warmer and the buds starting to shoot on the trees. I hardly saw anything of Rochester or Jane, as they had eyes only for each other. Mrs. Fairfax was not highly impressed by the union but I told her not to be so unreasonable. She flustered like an old hen at this remark and went about her business. The routine of Thornfield didn't waver from normalcy for the next few months; the season moved into summer and I was there on the day of the wedding, invited specifically by Rochester and hidden in the vestry. I saw the clergyman, a large man named Mr. Wood, ask whether anyone knew of an impediment that might prevent the wedding being lawful or joined by God. I heard the solicitor call out his terrible secret. Rochester, I could see, was beside himself with rage as Briggs read out the affidavit from Mason to declare that the madwoman was Bertha Rochester, Mason's sister and Rochester's legal wife. I remained in hiding as the argument ensued, emerging only when the small group was led over to the house by Rochester to meet his mad wife. I didn't follow; I went for a walk, breathing in the fresh air and avoiding the sadness and anguish in the house as Rochester and Jane realized they could not marry.

By the following day Jane was gone. I followed at a safe distance to see her take the road to Whitcross, looking like a small stray searching for a better life elsewhere. I watched her until she was out of sight and then walked into Millcote for lunch. Once I had finished my meal at The George I played cards with three traveling gamblers; by supertime I had taken six guineas off them. As I played, a small boy appeared at our table.

"Hello, William!" I said. "What news?"

I bent down to the height of the waif, who was dressed in adult-sized hand-me-downs that had been sewn up to fit.

"Begging your pardon, Miss Next, but Mr. Hedge has vanished."

I leaped up in some alarm, broke into a run and didn't stop until I arrived at The Millcote. I flew upstairs to the landing, where one of my most trusted spies was tugging at his flat cap nervously. Hades' room was empty.

"I'm sorry, miss. I was in the bar downstairs, not drinking, mind; I swear to it. He must have slipped past me--"

"Did anyone else come down the stairs, Daniel? Tell me quick!"

"No one. No one save the old lady . . ."

I took the horse from one of my riders and was at Thornfield in double-quick time. Neither of the guards at the doors had seen anything of Hades. I entered and found Edward in the morning room, toasting himself from a bottle of brandy. He raised his glass as I entered.

"She's gone, hasn't she?" he asked.

"She has."

"Damnation! Curse the circumstances that allowed me to be trapped into the wedding with that half-wit and curse my brother and father for entreating such a union!"

He fell into a chair and stared at the floor.

"Your work is done here?" he asked me resignedly.

"I think so, yes. I have only to find Hades and I can be off."

"Is he not at The Millcote?"

"Not any longer."

"But you expect to capture him?"

"I do; he seems weakened here."

"Then you had better tell me your password. Time may not be on our side when the moment comes. Forewarned is forearmed."

"True," I conceded. "To open the portal, you have to say--"

But at that moment the front door slammed, a gust of wind disturbed some papers, and a familiar footfall rang out on the tiles in the hall. I froze and looked across at Rochester who was staring into his glass.

"The code word?--"

I heard a voice calling to Pilot. It had the deep bass resonance of the master of the house.

"Blast!" murmured Hades as he melted from his disguise as Rochester and leaped at the wall in a flash, bursting through the lath and plaster as though it were rice paper. By the time I had made my way to the hallway outside he had gone; vanished somewhere deep



into the house. Rochester joined me as I listened intently up the stairs, but no sound reached us. Edward guessed what had happened and quickly mustered his estate workers. Within twenty minutes he had them guarding the outside of the house, under strict orders to fire upon anyone who tried to escape without giving a prearranged password. This done, we returned to the library and Rochester drew out a set of pistols and loaded each carefully. He looked uneasily at my Browning automatic as he placed two percussion caps atop the nipples of the pistols and replaced the hammers.

"Bullets just make him mad," I told him.

"You have a better idea?"

I said nothing.

"Then you had better follow me. The sooner this menace is out of my book the better!"

All except Grace Poole and the madwoman had been removed from the house, and Mrs. Poole had been entreated not to open the door to anyone until the morning on any account, not even to Mr. Rochester. Rochester and I started at the library and moved through to the dining room and then the afternoon reception room. After this we searched the morning reception room and then the ballroom. All were empty. We returned to the staircase where we had placed John and Mathew, who both swore no one had passed them. Night had descended by this time; the men who stood guard had been given torches and their meager light flickered in the hall. The stairs and paneling of the house were of a dark wood which reflected light poorly; the belly of a whale would have been brighter. We reached the top of the stairs and looked left and right, but the house was dark and I cursed myself for not bringing a good flashlight. As if in answer to my thoughts a gust of wind blew out the candles and somewhere ahead a door banged. My heart missed a beat and Rochester muttered an oath as he stumbled into an oak chest. I quickly relit the candelabrum. In the warm glow we could see each other's timorous faces, and Rochester, realizing that my face was a reflection of his own, steeled himself to the task ahead and shouted:

"Coward! Show yourself!"

There was a loud concussion and a bright orange flash as Rochester fired off a shot in the direction of the staircase leading to the upper rooms.

"There! There he goes, like a rabbit; I fancy I winged him too!"

We hurried to the spot but there was no blood; merely the heavy lead ball embedded in the banister rail.

"We have him!" exclaimed Rochester. "There is no escape from up here except the roof and no way down without risking his neck on the guttering!"

We climbed the stairs and found ourselves in the upper corridor. The windows were larger up here but even so the interior was still insufferably gloomy. We stopped abruptly. Halfway down the corridor, standing in the shadows and with his face lit by the light of a single candle, was Hades. Running and hiding were not his style at all. He was holding the lighted candle close to a rolled-up piece of paper that I knew could only be the Wordsworth poem in which my aunt was imprisoned.

"The code word, if you will, Miss Next!"

"Never!"

He placed the candle closer to the paper and smiled at me.

"The code word, *please*!"

But his smile became an expression of agony; he let out a wild cry and the candle and poem fell to the ground. He turned slowly to reveal the cause of his pain. There, on his back and clinging on with grim determination, was Mrs. Rochester, the madwoman from Jamaica. She cackled maniacally and twisted a pair of scissors that she had buried between Hades' shoulder blades. He cried out once again and fell to his knees as the flame from the lit candle set fire to the layers of wax polish that had built up on a bureau. The flames greedily enveloped the piece of furniture and Rochester pulled some curtains down in order to smother them. But Hades was up again, his strength renewed: The scissors had been withdrawn. He swiped at Rochester and caught him on the chin; Edward reeled and fell heavily to the floor. A manic glee seemed to overcome Acheron as he took a spirit lamp from the sideboard and hurled it to the end of the corridor; it burst into flames and ignited some wall hangings. He turned on the madwoman, who went for him in a blur of flailing limbs. She deftly whipped Mycroft's battered instruction booklet from Hades' pocket, gave a demonic and triumphant cry and then ran off.

"Yield, Hades!" I yelled, firing off two shots. Acheron staggered with the force of the slugs but recovered quickly and ran after Bertha and the book. I picked up the precious poem and coughed in the thick smoke that had started to fill the corridor. The drapes were now well alight. I dragged Rochester to his feet. We ran after Hades, noticing as we did so that other fires had been started by Acheron in his pursuit of the instruction manual and the insane Creole. We caught up with them in a large back bedroom. It seemed as good a moment as any to open the portal; already the bed was ablaze and Hades and Bertha were playing a bizarre game of cat-and-mouse with her holding the booklet and brandishing the scissors at him, something he seemed to be genuinely fearful of.

"Say the words!" I said to Rochester.

"And they are?"

"Sweet madness!"

Rochester yelled them. Nothing. He yelled them even louder. Still nothing. I had made a mistake. *Jane Eyre* was written in the first-person narrative. Whatever was being read by Bowden and Mycroft back home was what Jane was experiencing--anything that happened to us didn't appear in the book and never would. I hadn't thought of this.

"Now what?" asked Rochester.

"I don't know. *Look out!!*"

Bertha made a wild lunge at us both and ran out of the door, swiftly followed by Hades, who was so intent on regaining the instruction manual that the two of us seemed of secondary importance. We followed them down the corridor, but the stairwell was now a wall of flame and the heat and smoke pushed us back. Coughing and with eyes streaming, Bertha escaped onto the roof with Hades, myself and Rochester not far behind. The cool air was welcome after the smoky interior of Thornfield. Bertha led us all down onto the lead roof of the ballroom. We could see that the fire had spread downstairs, the heavily polished furniture and floors giving the hungry flames plenty of nourishment; within a few minutes the large and tinder-dry house would be an inferno.

The madwoman was dancing a languid dance in her night-clothes; a dim memory, perhaps, from the time when she was a lady, and a far cry from the sad and pathetic existence she now endured. She growled like a caged animal and threatened Hades with the scissors as he cursed and entreated the return of the booklet, which she waved at him in a mocking fashion. Rochester and I watched, the shattering of windows and the crackle of the fire punctuating the silence of the night.

Rochester, annoyed at having nothing to do and tiring of watching his wife and Hades dance the danse macabre, loosed off the second pistol and hit Hades in the small of the back. Hades turned, unhurt but enraged. He drew his own gun and fired several shots in return as Rochester and I leaped behind a chimney stack. Bertha took full advantage of the opportunity and plunged the scissors deep into Hades' arm. He yelled in pain and terror and dropped his gun. Bertha danced happily around him, cackling wildly, as Hades fell to his knees.

A groan made me turn. One of Acheron's shots had passed straight through Rochester's palm. He pulled out his handkerchief and I helped him wrap it around his shattered hand.

I looked up again as Hades knocked the scissors from his arm; they flew through the air and landed close by. Powerful again and as angry as a lion, he leaped upon Bertha, held her tightly by the throat and

retrieved the booklet. He then picked her up and held her high above his head, she all the while uttering a demented yell that managed to drown out the sound of the fire. For a moment they were silhouetted against the flames that even now licked up against the night sky, then Hades took two quick steps to the parapet and threw Bertha over, her yell only silenced by the dull thud as she hit the ground three stories below. He stepped back from the parapet and turned to us with eyes blazing.

"Sweet madness, eh?" He laughed. "Jane is with her cousins; the narrative is with her. And I have the manual!"

He waved it at me, deposited it in his pocket and picked up his gun.

"Who's first?"

I fired but Hades clapped his open hand on the approaching bullet. He opened his fist; the slug was flattened into a small lead disc. He smiled and a shower of sparks flew up behind him. I fired again and he caught the slug once more. The slide on my automatic parked itself in the rearward position, empty and ready for the next clip. I had one but I didn't think it would make much difference. The inevitable presented itself: I'd had a good run, survived him more than any other living person and done all that was humanly possible. But luck doesn't always walk in your favor--mine had just run out.

Hades smiled at me.

"Timing is everything, Miss Next. I have the password, the manual, and the upper hand. The waiting game, as you can see, paid off."

He looked at me with a triumphant expression.

"It may come as some consolation that I planned to bestow upon you the honor of being Felix9. I will remember you always as my greatest adversary; I salute you for it. And you were right--you never did negotiate."

I wasn't listening. I was thinking about Tamworth, Snood and the rest of Hades' victims. I looked across at Rochester, who was cradling his blood-soaked hand; the fight had gone out of him.

"The Crimea will make us a fortune," went on Hades. "How much profit can we make on each plasma rifle? Five hundred pounds? A thousand? Ten thousand?"

I thought of my brother in the Crimea. He had called for me to come back for him, but I never did. My APC was hit by an artillery shell as I returned. I had to be forcibly restrained from taking another vehicle and returning to the battlefield. I never saw him again. I had never forgiven myself for leaving him.

Hades was still rambling, and I found myself almost wishing that he'd get on with it. Death, after all I had been through, suddenly seemed like a very comfortable option. At the height of any battle some say that there is a quietness where one can think calmly and

easily, the trauma of the surroundings screened off by the heavy curtain of shock. I was about to die, and only one seemingly banal question came to mind: Why on earth did Bertha's scissors have such a detrimental effect on Hades? I looked up at Acheron, who was mouthing words that I could not hear. I stood up and he fired. He was merely playing with me and the bullet flew wide--I didn't even blink. The scissors were the key; they had been made of *silver*. I reached into my trouser pocket for the silver bullet that Spike had given me. Acheron, vain and arrogant, was wasting time with pompous self-congratulation. He would pay dearly for the error. I slipped the shiny slug into my automatic and released the slide. It chambered the around smoothly, I aimed, pulled the trigger and saw something pluck at his chest. For a moment nothing happened. Then Acheron stopped talking and put his hand to where the round had hit home. He brought his fingers up to his face and looked at them with shocked surprise; he was used to having blood on his hands--but never his own. He turned to me, started to say something but then staggered for a moment before pitching heavily forward onto his face and moving no more. Acheron Hades, third-most evil man on the planet, was finally dead, killed on the roof of Thornfield Hall and mourned by no one.

There was little time to ponder Hades' demise; the flames were growing higher. I took Mycroft's manual and then pulled Rochester to his feet. We made our way to the parapet; the roof had grown hot and we could feel the beams beneath our feet starting to flex and buckle, causing the lead roof to ripple as though it were alive. We looked over but there was no way down. Rochester grasped my hand and ran along the roof to another window. He smashed it open and a blast of hot air made us duck.

"Servants' staircase!" he coughed. "This way!"

Rochester knew the way through the dark and smoky corridor by feel, and I followed him obediently, clutching his jacket tails to stop myself getting lost. We arrived at the top of the servants' staircase; the fire didn't seem to be as strong here and Rochester led me down the steps. We were halfway down when a fireball flared up in the kitchen and sent a mass of fire and hot gases through the corridor and up the staircase. I saw a huge red glow erupt in front of me as the stairway gave way beneath us. After that, blackness.

## 34.

### Nearly the End of *Their* Book

We waited for Thursday's call, the code word, but it didn't come. I read the narrative carefully, looking for some clue as to what had happened to her. I had suspected that Thursday might decide to stay if it was impossible to capture Hades. The denouement was drawing near; Jane would go to India and the book would end. Once that had happened we could switch the machine off. Thursday and Polly would be lost forever.

From Bowden Cable's journal

I OPENED my eyes, frowned, and looked around. I was in a small yet well-furnished room quite close to a half-open window. Across the lawn some tall poplars swayed in the breeze, but I didn't recognize the view; this was not Thornfield. The door opened and Mary walked in.

"Miss Next!" she said kindly. "What a fright you gave us!"

"Have I been unconscious long?"

"Three days. A very bad concussion, Dr. Carter said."

"Where?--"

"You're at Ferndean, Miss Next," replied Mary soothingly, "one of Mr. Rochester's other properties. You will be weak; I'll bring some broth."

I grabbed her arm.

"And Mr. Rochester?"

She paused and smiled at me, patted my hand and said she would fetch the broth.

I lay back, thinking about the night Thornfield burned. Poor Bertha Rochester. Had she realized that she had saved our lives by her fortuitous choice of weapons? Perhaps, somewhere in her addled mind, she was in tune with the abomination that had been Hades. I would never know, but I thanked her anyway.

Within a week I was able to get up and move about, although I still suffered badly from headaches and dizziness. I learned that after the servants' staircase had collapsed I had been knocked unconscious. Rochester, in great pain himself, had wrapped me in a curtain and dashed with me from the burning house. He had been hit by a falling beam in the attempt and was blinded; the hand shattered by Acheron's bullet had been amputated the morning following the fire. I met with him in the darkness of the dining room.

"Are you in much pain, sir?" I asked, looking at the bedraggled figure; he still had bandaged eyes.

"Luckily, no," he lied, wincing as he moved.

"Thank you; you have saved my life for a second time."

He gave a wan smile.

"You returned my Jane to me. For those few months of happiness, I would suffer twice these wounds. But let us not speak of my wretched state. You are well?"

"Thanks to you."

"Yes, yes, but how will you return? I expect Jane is already in India by now with that gutless pantaloon Rivers; and with her goes the narrative. I don't see your friends being able to rescue you."

"I will think of something," I said, patting him on the sleeve. "You never know what the future will bring."

It was the morning of the following day; my months in the book had passed in as much time as it takes to read them. The Welsh Politburo, alerted to the wrongdoings on their doorstep, had given Victor, Finisterre and a member of the Bronte Federation a safe conduct to the moldering Penderyn Hotel, where they now stood with Bowden, Mycroft and an increasingly nervous Jack Schitt. The representative of the Bronte Federation was reading the words as they appeared on the yellowed manuscript in front of him. Aside from a few minor changes, the book was traveling the same course it always did; it had been word perfect for the past two hours. Jane was being proposed to by St. John Rivers, who wanted her to go with him to India as his wife, and she was about to make up her mind.

Mycroft drummed his fingers on the desk and glanced at the rows of flicking dials on his contraption; all he needed was somewhere to open the door. Trouble was, they were fast running out of pages.

Then, the miraculous happened. The Bronte Federation expert, a small, usually unexcitable man named Plink, was suddenly ignited by shock.

"Wait a minute; this is new! This didn't happen!"

"What?" cried Victor, rapidly flicking to his own copy. Indeed, Mr. Plink was correct. There, as the words etched themselves across the paper, was a new development in the narrative. After Jane promised St. John Rivers that if it was God's will that they should be married, then they would, there was a voice--a *new* voice, Rochester's voice, calling to her across the ether. But from where? It was a question that was being asked simultaneously by nearly eighty million people worldwide, all following the new story unfolding in front of their eyes.

"What does it mean?" asked Victor.

"I don't know," replied Plink. "It's pure Charlotte Bronte but it *definitely* wasn't there before!"

"Thursday," murmured Victor. "It has to be. Mycroft, stay on your toes!"

They read delightedly as Jane changed her mind about India and St. John Rivers and decided to return to Thornfield.

I made it back to Ferndean and Rochester just before Jane did. I met Rochester in the dining room and told him the news; how I had found her at the Riverses' house, gone to her window and barked: "Jane, Jane, Jane!" in a hoarse whisper the way that Rochester did. It wasn't a good impersonation but it did the trick. I saw Jane start to fluster and pack almost immediately. Rochester seemed less than excited about the news.

"I don't know whether I should thank you or curse you, Miss Next. To think that I should be seen like this, a blind man with one good arm. And Thornfield a ruin! She shall hate me, I know it!"

"You are wrong, Mr. Rochester. And if you know Jane as well as I think you do, you would not even begin to entertain such thoughts!"

There was a rap at the door. It was Mary. She announced that Rochester had a visitor but that they would not give their name.

"Oh Lord!" exclaimed Rochester. "It's her! Tell me, Miss Next, could she love me? Like this, I mean?"

I leaned across and kissed his forehead.

"Of course she could. Anyone could. Mary, refuse her entry; if I know her she will enter anyway. Goodbye, Mr. Rochester. I can think of no way to thank you, so I shall just say that you and Jane will be in my thoughts always."

Rochester moved his head, trying to gauge where I was by sound alone. He put out his hand and held mine tightly. He was warm to the touch, yet soft. Thoughts of Landen entered my mind.

"Farewell, Miss Next! You have a great heart; do not let it go to waste. You have one who loves you and whom you love yourself. Choose happiness!"

I slipped quickly out into the adjoining room as Jane entered. I quietly latched the door as Rochester did a fine job of pretending that he didn't know who she was.

"Give me the water, Mary," I heard him say. There was a rustle and then I heard Pilot padding about.

"What is the matter?" asked Rochester in his most annoyed and gruff expression. I stifled a giggle.

"Down, Pilot!" said Jane. The dog was quiet and there was a pause.

"This is you, Mary, is it not?" asked Rochester.

"Mary is in the kitchen," replied Jane.

I pulled the now battered manual out of my pocket with the slightly charred poem. I still had Jack Schitt to contend with, but that would have to wait. I sat down on a chair as an exclamation from Rochester made its way through the door:



"Who is it? What is it? Who speaks?"

I strained to hear the conversation.

"Pilot knows me," returned Jane happily, "and John and Mary know I am here. I came only this afternoon!"

"Great God!" exclaimed Rochester. "What delusion has come over me? What sweet madness has seized me?"

I whispered: "Thank you, Edward," as the portal opened in the corner of the room. I took one last look around at a place to which I would never return, and stepped through.

There was a flash and a blast of static, Ferndean Manor was gone, and in its place I saw the familiar surroundings of the shabby lounge of the Penderyn Hotel. Bowden, Mycroft and Victor all rushed forward to greet me. I handed the manual and poem to Mycroft, who swiftly set about opening the door to "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud."

"Hades?" asked Victor.

"Dead."

"Completely?"

"Utterly."

In a few moments the Prose Portal reopened and Mycroft rushed inside, returning shortly afterward clutching Polly by the hand; she was holding a bunch of daffodils and trying to explain something.

"We were just *talking*, Crofty, my love! You don't think I would be interested in a dead poet, do you?"

"My turn," said Jack Schitt excitedly, waving his copy of *The Plasma Rifle in War*. He placed it with the bookworms and signaled to Mycroft to open the portal. As soon as the worms had done their work Mycroft did as he was bid. Schitt grinned and reached through the shimmering white doorway, feeling around for one of the plasma rifles that had been so well described in the book. Bowden had other ideas. He gave him a small shove and Jack Schitt disappeared through the doorway with a yell. Bowden nodded at Mycroft, who pulled the plug; the machine fell silent, the gateway to the book severed. It was bad timing on Jack Schitt's part. In his eagerness to get his hands on the rifle he had not made sure his Goliath officers were with him. By the time the two guards had returned, Bowden was assisting Mycroft in smashing the Prose Portal after carefully transferring the bookworms and returning the original manuscript of *Jane Eyre*--the ending now slightly altered-- to the Bronte Federation.

"Where's Colonel Schitt?" asked the first officer.

Victor shrugged.

"He went away. Something to do with plasma rifles."

The Goliath officers would have asked more questions but the Welsh foreign secretary himself had arrived and announced that since the

matter was now resolved we would be escorted from the Republic. The Goliath operatives started to argue but were soon ushered from the room by several members of the Welsh Republican Army, who were definitely *not* impressed by their threats.

We were driven in the presidential limousine out of Merthyr and dropped in Abertawe. The Bronte Federation representative was icily quiet during the entire trip--I sensed he wasn't that happy about the new ending. When we got to the town I gave them the slip, ran to my car and hastily drove back to Swindon, Rochester's words ringing in my ears. Landen's marriage to Daisy was happening at three that afternoon and I was sure as hell going to be there.

## 35.

### Nearly the End of *OurBook*

I had disrupted *Jane Eyre* quite considerably; my cry of "Jane, Jane, Jane!" at her window had altered the book for good. It was against my training, against everything that I had sworn to uphold. I didn't see it as anything more than a simple act of contrition for what I felt was my responsibility over Rochester's wounds and the burning of Thornfield. I had acted out of compassion, not duty, and sometimes that is no bad thing.

THURSDAY NEXT

--private diaries

**A**T FIVE past three I screeched to a halt outside the Church of Our Blessed Lady of the Lobsters, much to the surprise of the photographer and the driver of a large Hispano-Suiza that was parked in readiness for the happy couple. I took a deep breath, paused to gather my thoughts and, shaking slightly, walked up the steps to the main doors. The organ music was playing loudly and my pace, which up to that point had been a run, suddenly slowed as my nerve abandoned me. What the hell was I playing at? Did I think I had any real chance of appearing from nowhere after a ten-year absence and then expecting the man I was once in love with just to drop everything and marry me?

"Oh yes," said a woman to her companion as they walked past me, "Landen and Daisy are so much in love!"

My walk slowed to a snail's pace as I found myself hoping to be too late and have the burden of decision taken from me. The church was full, and I slid unnoticed into the back, just next to the lobster-shaped font. I could see Landen and Daisy at the front, attended to by a small bevy of pages and bridesmaids. There were many uniformed guests in the small church, friends of Landen's from the Crimea. I could see someone whom I took to be Daisy's mother sniveling into her handkerchief and her father looking impatiently at his watch. On Landen's side his mother was on her own.

"I require and charge you both," the clergyman was saying, "that if either of you know any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, ye do now confess it."

He paused, and several guests shuffled. Mr. Mutlar, whose lack of chin had been amply compensated by increased girth in his neck, seemed ill at ease and looked about the church nervously. The clergyman turned to Landen and opened his mouth to speak, but as he

did so there came a loud, clear voice from the back of the church:

"The marriage cannot go on: I declare the existence of an impediment!"

One hundred and fifty heads turned to see who the speaker was. One of Landen's friends laughed out loud; he obviously thought it was a joke. The speaker's countenance did not, however, look as though any humor was intended. Daisy's father was having none of it. Landen was a good catch for his daughter and a small and tasteless joke was not going to delay her wedding.

"Proceed!" he said, his face like thunder.

The clergyman looked at the speaker, then at Daisy and Landen, and finally at Mr. Mutlar.

"I cannot proceed without some investigation into what has been asserted and evidence of its truth or falsehood," he said with a pained expression; nothing like this had ever happened to him before.

Mr. Mutlar had turned an unhealthy shade of crimson and might have struck the speaker had he been close enough.

"What is this nonsense?" he shouted instead, setting the room buzzing.

"Not nonsense, sir," replied the speaker in a clear voice. "Bigamy is hardly nonsense, I think, sir."

I stared at Landen, who looked confused at the turn of events. Was he married already? I couldn't believe it. I looked back at the speaker and my heart missed a beat. It was Mr. Briggs, the solicitor I had last seen in the church at Thornfield! There was a rustle close by and I turned to find Mrs. Nakijima standing next to me. She smiled and raised a finger to her lips. I frowned, and the clergyman spoke again.

"What is the nature of this impediment? Perhaps it may be got over--explained away?"

"Hardly," was the answer. "I have called it insuperable and I speak advisedly. It consists simply of a previous marriage."

Landen and Daisy looked at one another sharply.

"*Who the hell are you?*" asked Mr. Mutlar, who seemed to be the only person galvanized into action.

"My name is Briggs, a solicitor of Dash Street, London."

"Well, Mr. Briggs, perhaps you would be good enough to explain the previous marriage of Mr. Parke-Laine so we may all know the extent of this man's cowardly action."

Briggs looked at Mr. Mutlar and then at the couple at the altar.

"My information does not concern Mr. Parke-Laine; I am speaking of Miss Mutlar, or, to give her her married name, Mrs. Daisy Posh!"

There was a gasp from the congregation. Landen looked at Daisy, who threw her garland on the floor. One of the bridesmaids started to cry, and Mr. Mutlar strode forward and took Daisy's arm.

"Miss Mutlar married Mr. Murray Posh on October 20, 1981," yelled Mr. Briggs above the uproar. "The service was held at Southwark. There was no divorce petition filed."

It was enough for everyone. A clamor started up as the Mutlar family beat a hasty retreat. The vicar offered an unheard-of prayer to no one in particular as Landen took a much needed seat on the pew that the Mutlar family had just vacated. Someone yelled "gold digger!" from the back, and the Mutlar family quickened their pace at the abuse that followed, much of which shouldn't have been heard in church. One of the pages tried to kiss a bridesmaid in the confusion and was slapped for his trouble. I leaned against the cool stone of the church and wiped the tears from my eyes. I know it was wrong of me, but I was laughing. Briggs stepped through the arguing guests and joined us, tipping his hat respectfully.

"Good afternoon, Miss Next."

"A very good afternoon, Mr. Briggs! What on earth are you doing here?"

"The Rochesters sent me."

"But I only left the book three hours ago!"

Mrs. Nakijima interrupted.

"You left it barely twelve pages from the end. In that time over ten years have elapsed at Thornfield; time enough for *much* planning!"

"Thornfield?"

"Rebuilt, yes. My husband retired and he and I manage the house these days. None of us is mentioned in the book and Mrs. Rochester aims to keep it that way; much more pleasant than Osaka and certainly more rewarding than the tourist business."

There didn't seem much I could say.

"Mrs. Jane Rochester asked Mrs. Nakijima to bring me here to assist," said Mr. Briggs simply. "She and Mr. Rochester were eager to help you as you helped them. They wish you all happiness and health for the future and thank you for your timely intervention."

I smiled.

"How are they?"

"Oh, they're fine, miss," replied Briggs happily. "Their firstborn is now five; a fine healthy boy, the image of his father. Jane produced a beautiful daughter this spring gone past. They have named her Helen Thursday Rochester."

I looked across at Landen, who was standing at the entrance to the church and trying to explain to his Aunt Ethel what was going on.

"I must speak to him."

But I was talking to myself. Mrs. Nakijima and the solicitor had gone; melted back to Thornfield to report to Jane and Edward on a job well done.

As I approached, Landen sat on the church steps, took out his carnation and sniffed at it absently.

"Hello, Landen."

Landen looked up and blinked.

"Ah," he said, "Thursday. I might have known."

"May I join you?"

"Be my guest."

I sat down next to him on the warm limestone steps. He stared straight ahead.

"Was this your doing?" he asked at last.

"No, indeed," I replied. "I confess I came here to interrupt the wedding but my nerve failed me."

He looked at me.

"Why?"

"Why? Well, because . . . because I thought I'd make a better Mrs. Parke-Laine than Daisy, I suppose."

"I know *that*," exclaimed Landen, "and agree wholeheartedly. What I wanted to know is why your nerve failed you. After all, you chase after master criminals, indulge in high-risk SpecOps work, will quite happily go against orders to rescue comrades under an intense artillery barrage, yet--"

"I get the point. I don't know. Maybe those sorts of yes-or-no life-and-death decisions are easier to make because they are so black and white. I can cope with them because it's easier. Human emotions, well . . . they're just a fathomless collection of grays and I don't do so well on the midtones."

"Midtones is where I've lived for the past ten years, Thursday."

"I know and I'm sorry. I had a lot of trouble reconciling what I felt for you and what I saw as your betrayal of Anton. It was an emotional tug-of-war and I was the little pocket handkerchief in the middle, tied to the rope, not moving."

"I loved him too, Thursday. He was the closest thing to a brother that I ever had. But I couldn't hang onto my end of the rope forever."

"I left something behind in the Crimea," I murmured, "but I think I've found it again. Is there time to try and make it all work?"

"Bit eleventh-hour, isn't it?" he said with a grin.

"No," I replied, "more like three seconds to midnight!"

He kissed me gently on the lips. It felt warm and satisfying, like coming home to a roaring log fire after a long walk in the rain. My eyes welled up and I sobbed quietly into his collar as he held me tightly.

"Excuse me," said the vicar, who had been lurking close by. "I'm sorry to have to interrupt, but I have another wedding to perform at three-thirty."

We muttered our apologies and stood up. The wedding guests were still waiting for some sort of decision. Nearly all of them knew about Landen and me and few, if any, thought Daisy a better match.

"Will you?" asked Landen in my ear.

"Will I what?" I asked, stifling a giggle.

"Fool! Will you marry me?"

"Hmm," I replied, heart thumping like the artillery in the Crimea.

"I'll have to think about it!--"

Landen raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Yes! Yes, yes! I will, I will, with all my heart!"

"At last!" said Landen with a sigh. "The lengths I have to go to to get the woman I love! . . ."

We kissed again but for longer this time; so long in fact that the vicar, still staring at his watch, had to tap Landen on the shoulder.

"Thank you for the rehearsal," said Landen, shaking the vicar vigorously by the hand. "We'll be back in a month's time for the real thing!"

The vicar shrugged. This was fast becoming the most ludicrous wedding of his career.

"Friends," announced Landen to the remaining guests, "I would like to announce the engagement of myself to this lovely SpecOps agent named Thursday Next. As you know, she and I have had our differences in the past but they are now *quite* forgotten. There is a marquee at my house stuffed with food and drink and I understand Holroyd Wilson will be playing from six o'clock onward. It would be a crime to waste it all so I suggest we just change the reason!"

There was an excited yell from the guests as they started to organize transport for themselves. Landen and I went in my car but we drove the long way round. We had plenty to talk about and the party . . . well, it could continue without us for a while.

The celebrations didn't finish until 4 A.M. I drank too much and took a cab back to the hotel. Landen was all for me staying the night, but I told him slightly coquettishly that he could wait until after the wedding. I vaguely remember getting back to my hotel room but nothing else; it was blackness until the phone rang at nine the following morning. I was half dressed, Pickwick was watching breakfast TV, and my head ached like it was fit to burst.

It was Victor. He didn't sound in a terribly good mood but politeness was one of his stronger points. He asked me how I was.

I looked at the alarm clock as a hammer banged inside my head.

"I've been better. How are things at work?"

"Not brilliant," replied Victor with a certain reserve in his voice.

"The Goliath Corporation want to speak to you about Jack Schitt and

the Bronte Federation are hopping mad over the damage to the book. Was it *absolutely* necessary to burn Thornfield to the ground?"

"That was Hades--"

"And Rochester? Blinded and with a shattered hand? I suppose that was Hades too?"

"Well, yes."

"This is the mother of all balls-ups, Thursday. You'd better come in and explain yourself to these Bronte people. I've got their Special Executive Committee with me and they are not here to pin a medal on your chest."

There was a knock at the door. I told Victor I would be in directly and got unsteadily to my feet.

"Hello?" I called out.

"Room service!" replied a voice outside the door. "A Mr. Parke-Laine rang in some coffee for you!"

"Hang on!" I said as I tried to shoo Pickwick back into the bathroom; the hotel had strict rules about pets. Unusually for him he seemed slightly aggressive; if he had possessed any wings he would probably have flapped them angrily.

"This...is...no...time...to...be...a...pest!" I grunted as I pushed the recalcitrant bird into the bathroom and locked the door.

I held my head for a moment as it thumped painfully, wrapped myself in a dressing gown and opened the door. *Big* mistake. There was a waiter there but he wasn't alone. As soon as the door was fully open two other men in dark suits entered and pressed me against the wall with a gun to my head.

"You're going to need another two cups if you want to join me for coffee," I groaned.

"Very funny," said the man dressed as the waiter.

"Goliath?"

"In one."

He pulled back the hammer on the revolver.

"Gloves are off, Next. Schitt is an important man and we need to know where he is. National security and the Crimea depend upon it and one lousy officer's life isn't worth diddly shit when you look at the big picture."

"I'll take you to him," I gasped, trying to give myself some breathing space. "It's a little way out of town."

The Goliath agent relaxed his grip and told me to get dressed. A few minutes later we were walking out of the hotel. My head was still sore and a dull pain thumped in my temples, but at least I was thinking more clearly. There was a small crowd ahead of me, and I was delighted to see it was the Mutlar family preparing to return to London. Daisy was arguing with her father and Mrs. Mutlar was



shaking her head wearily.

"Gold digger!" I yelled.

Daisy and her father stopped arguing and looked at me as the Goliath men tried to steer me past.

"What did you say!?"

"You heard. I can't think who the bigger tart is, your daughter or your wife."

It had the desired effect. Mr. Mutlar turned an odd shade of crimson and threw a fist in my direction. I ducked and the blow struck one of the Goliath men fairly and squarely on the jaw. I bolted for the car park. A shot whistled over my shoulder; I jinked and stepped into the road as a big black military-style Ford motor car screeched to a halt.

"Get in!" shouted the driver. I didn't need to be asked twice. I jumped in and the Ford sped off as two bullet holes appeared in the rear windshield. The car screeched around the corner and was soon out of range.

"Thanks," I murmured. "Any later and I might have been worm food. Can you drop me at SpecOps HQ?"

The driver didn't say anything; there was a glass partition between me and him and all of a sudden I had that out-of-the-frying-pan-and-into-the-fire feeling.

"You can drop me anywhere," I said. He didn't answer. I tried the door handles but they were locked. I thumped on the glass but he ignored me; we drove past the SpecOps building and headed off to the old town. He was driving fast too. Twice he went through a red light and once he cut up a bus; I was thrown against the door as he flew around a corner, just missing a brewer's dray.

"Here, stop this car!" I shouted, banging again on the glass partition. The driver simply accelerated, clipping another car as he took a corner a little too fast.

I pulled hard at the door handles and was about to use my heels against the window when the car abruptly screeched to a halt; I slid off the seat and collapsed in a heap in the footwell. The driver got out, opened the door for me and said:

"There you go, missy, didn't want you to be late. Colonel Phelps's orders."

"Colonel Phelps?" I stammered. The driver smiled and saluted briskly as the penny dropped. Phelps had said he would send a car for me to appear at his talk, and he had.

I looked out of the door. We had pulled up outside Swindon Town Hall, and a vast crowd of people were staring at me.

"Hello, Thursday!" said a familiar voice.

"Lydia?" I asked, caught off guard by the sudden change of events.

And so it was. But she wasn't the only TV news reporter; there were

six or seven of them with their cameras trained on me as I sat sprawled inelegantly in the footwell. I struggled to get out of the car.

"This is Lydia Startright of the Toad News Network," said Lydia in her best reporter's voice, "here with Thursday Next, the SpecOps agent responsible for saving *Jane Eyre*. First let me congratulate you, Miss Next, on your successful reconstruction of the novel!"

"What do you mean?" I responded. "I loused it all up! I burned Thornfield to the ground and half-maimed poor Mr. Rochester!"

Miss Startright laughed.

"In a recent survey ninety-nine out of a hundred readers who expressed a preference said they were delighted with the new ending. Jane and Rochester married! Isn't that *wonderful*?"

"But the Bronte Federation--?"

"Charlotte didn't leave the book to them, Miss Next," said a man dressed in a linen suit who had a large blue Charlotte Bronte rosette stuck incongruously to his lapel.

"The federation are a bunch of stuffed shirts. Allow me to introduce myself. Walter Branwell, chairman of the federation splinter group 'Bronte for the People.' "

He thrust out a hand for me to shake and grinned wildly as several people near by applauded. A battery of flashguns went off as a small girl handed me a bunch of flowers and another journalist asked me what sort of a person Rochester *really* was. The driver took my arm and guided me into the building.

"Colonel Phelps is waiting for you, Miss Next," murmured the man in an affable tone. The crowds parted as I was led into a large hall that was filled to capacity. I blinked stupidly and looked around. There was an excited buzz, and as I walked down the main aisle I could hear people whispering my name. There was an improvised press box in the old orchestra pit in which a sea of pressmen from all the major networks were seated. The meeting at Swindon had become the focus of the grassroots feeling about the war; what was said here would be highly significant. I made my way to the stage, where two tables had been set up. The two sides to the argument were clearly delineated. Colonel Phelps was sitting beneath a large English flag; his table was heavily festooned with bunting and several pot plants, flip-over pads and stacks of leaflets for ready distribution. With him were mostly uniformed members of the armed forces who had seen service on the peninsula. All of them were willing to speak vociferously about the importance of the Crimea. One of the soldiers was even carrying the new plasma rifle.

At the other end of the stage was the "anti" table. This too was liberally populated by veterans, but none of them wore uniforms. I recognized the two students from the airship park and my brother

Joffy, who smiled and mouthed "Wotcha, Doofus!" at me. The crowd hushed; they had heard I was going to attend and had been awaiting my arrival.

The cameras followed me as I approached the steps to the stage and walked calmly up. Phelps rose to meet me, but I walked on and sat down at the "anti" table, taking the seat that one of the students had given up for me. Phelps was appalled; he went bright red, but checked himself when he saw that the cameras were watching his every move.

Lydia Startright had followed me onto the stage. She was there to adjudicate the meeting; it was she and Colonel Phelps who had insisted on waiting for me. Startright was glad they had; Phelps was not.

"Ladies and gentlemen," announced Lydia grandly, "the negotiating table is empty at Budapest and the offensive lies waiting to happen. As a million troops face each other across no-man's-land, we ask the question: What price the Crimea?"

Phelps got up to speak but I beat him to it.

"I know it's an old joke," I began, "but a simple anagram of 'Crimea' is 'A Crime.'" I paused. "That's the way I see it and I would defy anyone to say that it isn't. Even Colonel Phelps over there would agree with me that it's high time the Crimea was put to bed permanently."

Colonel Phelps nodded.

"Where the Colonel and I differ is my belief that Russia has the better claim to the territory."

It was a controversial remark; Phelps's supporters were well primed, and it took ten minutes to restore order. Startright quieted them all down and finally managed to get me to finish my point.

"There was a good chance for all this nonsense to end barely two months ago. England and Russia were around the table, discussing terms for a complete withdrawal of all English troops."

There was a hush. Phelps had leaned back in his chair and was watching me carefully.

"But then along came the plasma rifle. Code name: Stonk."

I looked down for a moment.

"This Stonk was the key, the secret to a new offensive and the possible restart of the war that has--thank God--been relatively free of actual fighting these past eight years. But there's a problem. The offensive has been built on air; despite all that has been said and done, the plasma rifle is a phony--*Stonk does not work!*"

There was an excited murmuring in the chamber. Phelps stared at me sullenly, eyebrow twitching. He whispered something to a brigadier who was sitting next to him.

"The English troops are waiting for a new weapon that will *not* turn up. The Goliath Corporation have been playing the English

government for a bunch of fools; despite a billion-pound investment, the plasma rifle is about as much use in the Crimea as a broom handle."

I sat down. The significance of this was not lost on anyone either there or watching the program live; the English minister for war was at that moment reaching for his phone. He wanted to speak to the Russians before they did anything rash--like attack.

Back at the hall in Swindon, Colonel Phelps had stood up.

"Large claims from someone who is tragically ill informed," he intoned patronizingly. "We have all seen the destructive power of Stonk and its effectiveness is hardly the reason for this talk."

"Prove it," I responded. "I see you have a plasma rifle with you. Lead us outside to the park and show us. You can try it on me, if you so wish."

Phelps paused, and in that pause he lost the argument--and the war. He looked at the soldier carrying the weapon, who looked back at him nervously.

Phelps and his people left the stage to barracking from the crowd. He had been hoping to give his carefully rehearsed hour-long lecture over the memory of the lost brethren and the value of comradeship; he never spoke in public again.

Within four hours a ceasefire had been called for the first time in 131 years. Within four weeks the politicians were around the table in Budapest. Within four months every single English soldier was out of the peninsula. As for the Goliath Corporation, they were soon called to account over their deceit. They expressed wholly unconvincing ignorance of the whole affair and laid the blame entirely on Jack Schitt. I had hoped the Corporation would be chastized further, but at least it got Goliath off my back.

## 36.

### Married

Landen and I were married the same day as peace was declared in the Crimea. Landen told me it was to save on the fee for bell-ringers. I looked around nervously when the vicar got to the bit about "Speak now or forever hold their peace" but there was no one there. I met with the Bronte Federation and they soon got used to the idea of the new ending, especially when they realized that they were the only people who objected. I was sorry about Rochester's wounds and the burning down of his house, but I was very glad that he and Jane, after over a hundred years of dissatisfaction, finally found the true peace and happiness that they both so richly deserved.

THURSDAY NEXT

--*A Life in SpecOps*

THE RECEPTION turned out to be bigger than we thought and by ten o'clock it had spilled out into Landen's garden. Boswell had got a little drunk so I popped him in a cab and sent him to the Finis. Paige Turner had been getting along well with the saxophonist--no one had seen either of them for at least an hour. Landen and I were enjoying a quiet moment to ourselves. I squeezed his hand, and asked:

"Would you *really* have married Daisy if Briggs hadn't intervened?"

"I've got those answers you wanted, Sweetpea!"

"Dad?"

He was attired in the full dress uniform of a colonel in the ChronoGuard.

"I've been thinking about what you said and I made a few enquiries."

"I'm sorry, Dad, I've got no idea what you're talking about."

"You remember, we spoke about two minutes ago?"

"No."

He frowned and looked at us both in turn, then at his watch.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "I must be early. Damn these chronographs!"

He tapped the dial and left quickly without saying another word.

"Your father?" asked Landen. "I thought you said he was on the run?"

"He was. He is. He will be. You know."

"Sweetpea!" said my father again. "Surprised to see me?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Congratulations to the two of you!"

I glanced around at the party still in full swing. Time was *not*

standing still. It wouldn't be long before the ChronoGuard tracked him down.

"To hell with SO-12, Thursday!" said he, divining my thoughts and taking a glass from a passing waiter. "I wanted to meet my son-in-law."

He turned to Landen, grasped his hand and sized him up carefully.

"How are you, my boy? Have you had a vasectomy?"

"Well, no," replied Landen, vaguely embarrassed.

"How about a heavy tackle playing rugby?"

"No."

"Kick from a horse in the nether regions?"

"No."

"What about a cricket ball in the goolies?"

"No!"

"Good. Then we might get some grandchildren out of this fiasco. It's high time little Thursday here was popping out some sprogs instead of dashing around like some wild mountain piglet--" He paused. "You're both looking at me very oddly."

"You were here not a minute ago."

He frowned, raised an eyebrow and looked about furtively.

"If it *was* me, and if I *know* me, I'd be hiding somewhere close by. Oh yes, look! Look there!"

He pointed to a corner of the garden where a figure was hiding in the shadows behind the potting shed. He narrowed his eyes and thought through the most logical train of events.

"Let's see. I must have offered to do you a favor, done it and come back but a little out of time; not uncommon in my line of work."

"What favor would I have asked you to do?" I ventured, still confused but more than willing to play along.

"I don't know," said my father. "A burning question that has been much discussed over the years but has, so far, remained unanswered."

I thought for a moment.

"How about the authorship of the Shakespeare plays?"

He smiled. "Good point. I'll see what I can do."

He finished his drink.

"Well, congratulations again to the two of you; I must be off. Time waits for no man, as we say."

He smiled, wished us every happiness for the future, and departed.

"Can you explain just *what* is going on?" asked Landen, thoroughly confused, not so much by the events themselves as by the order in which they were happening.

"Not really."

"Have I gone, Sweetpea?" asked my father, who had returned from his hiding place behind the shed.

"Yes."

"Good. Well, I found out what you wanted to know. I went to London in 1610 and found that Shakespeare was only an actor with a potentially embarrassing sideline as a purveyor of bagged commodities in Stratford. No wonder he kept it quiet-- wouldn't you?"

This was interesting indeed.

"So who wrote them? Marlowe? Bacon?"

"No; there was a bit of a problem. You see, no one had even *heard* of the plays, much less written them."

I didn't understand.

"What are you saying? There aren't any?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. They don't exist. They were never written. Not by him, not by anyone."

"I'm sorry," said Landen, unwilling to take much more of this, "but we saw *Richard III* only six weeks ago."

"Of course," said my father. "Time is out of joint *big time*. Obviously something had to be done. I took a copy of the complete works back with me and gave them to the actor Shakespeare in 1592 to distribute on a given timetable. Does that answer your question?"

I was still confused.

"So it *wasn't* Shakespeare who wrote the plays."

"Decidedly not!" he agreed. "Nor Marlowe, Oxford, De Vere, Bacon or any of the others."

"But that's not possible!" exclaimed Landen.

"On the contrary," replied my father. "Given the huge timescale of the cosmos, impossible things are commonplace. When you've lived as long as I have you'll know that absolutely *anything* is possible. Time is out of joint; O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!"

"*You* put that in?" I asked, always assuming he was quoting from *Hamlet* and not the other way round.

He smiled.

"A small personal vanity that I'm sure will be forgiven, Thursday. Besides: Who's to know?"

My father stared at his empty glass, looked around in vain for a waiter, then said:

"Lavoisier will have locked onto me by now. He swore he'd catch me and he's good. He should be; we were partners for almost seven centuries. Just one more thing: how did the Duke of Wellington die?"

I remembered he had asked me this once before.

"As I said, Dad, he died in his bed in 1852."

Father smiled and rubbed his hands.

"That's *excellent* news indeed! How about Nelson?"

"Shot by a French sniper at Trafalgar."

"Really? Well, some you win. Listen: good luck, the pair of you. A

boy or a girl would be fine; one of each would be better."

He leaned closer and lowered his voice.

"I don't know when I am going to be back, so listen carefully. Never buy a blue car or a paddling pool, stay away from oysters and circular saws, and don't be near Oxford in June 2016. Got it?"

"Yes, but!--"

"Well, pip pip, time waits for no man!"

He hugged me again, shook Landen's hand and then disappeared into the crowd before we could ask him anything more.

"Don't even *try* to figure it out," I said to Landen, placing a finger to his lips. "This is one area of SpecOps that it's really better not to think about."

"But if!--"

"Landen!--" I said more severely. "No!--"

Bowden and Victor were at the party too. Bowden was happy for me and had come easily to the realization that I wouldn't be joining him in Ohio, as either wife or assistant. He had been offered the job officially but had turned it down; he said there was too much fun to be had at the Swindon Litera Tecs and he would reconsider it in the spring; Finisterre had taken his place. But at present, something else was preying on his mind. Helping himself to a stiff drink, he approached Victor, who was talking animatedly to an elderly woman he had befriended.

"What ho, Cable!" Victor murmured, introducing his newfound friend before agreeing to have a quiet word with him.

"Good result, eh? Balls to the Bronte Federation; I'm with Thursday. I think the new ending is a wiz!" He paused and looked at Bowden. "You've got a face longer than a Dickens novel. What's the problem? Worried about Felix8?"

"No, sir; I know they'll find him eventually. It's just that I *accidentally* mixed up the dust covers on the book that Jack Schitt went into."

"You mean he's not with his beloved rifles?"

"No, sir. I took the liberty of slipping *this* book into the dust cover of *The Plasma Rifle in War*."

He handed over the book that had made its way into the Prose Portal. Victor looked at the spine and laughed. It was a copy of *The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*.

"Have a look at page twenty-six," said Bowden. "There's something funny going on in 'The Raven.'"

Victor opened the book and scanned the page. He read the first verse out loud:



*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,*

*o'er a plan to venge myself upon that cursed Thursday Next--*

*This Eyre affair, so surprising, gives my soul such loath despoising,*

*Here I plot my temper rising, rising from my jail of text.*

*"Get me out!" I said, advising, "Pluck me from this jail of text--*

*or I swear I'll wring your neck!"*

Victor shut the book with a snap.

"The last line doesn't rhyme very well, does it?"

"What do you expect?" replied Bowden. "He's Goliath, not a poet."

"But I read 'The Raven' only yesterday," added Victor in a confused tone. "It wasn't like this then!"

"No, no," explained Bowden. "Jack Schitt is only in *this* copy--if we had put him in an original manuscript then who knows what he might have done."

"Con-g'rat-ula'tions!" exclaimed Mycroft as he walked up to us. Polly was with him and looked radiant in a new hat.

"We're Bo'th Very Hap-py For You!" added Polly.

"Have you been working on the bookworms again?" I asked.

"Doe's It Sh'ow?" asked Mycroft. "Mu'st Dash!"

And they were off.

"Bookworms?" asked Landen.

"It's not what you think."

"Mademoiselle Next?"

There were two of them. They were dressed in sharp suits and displayed SpecOps-12 badges that I hadn't seen before.

"Yes?"

"Prefet Lavoisier, ChronoGendarmerie. *Oe1 est votre pe re?*"

"You've just missed him."

He cursed out loud.

*"Colonel Next est un homme tre s dangereux, mademoiselle. Il est important de lui parler concernant ses activites de trafic de temps."*

"He's my father, Lavoisier."

Lavoisier stared at me, trying to figure out whether anything he could say or do would make me help him. He sighed and gave up.

*"Si vous changez votre avis, contactez-moi par les petites annonces du Grenouille. Je lis toujours les archives."*

"I shouldn't count on it, Lavoisier."

He mulled this over for a moment, thought of something to say, decided against it and smiled instead. He saluted briskly, told me in

perfect English to enjoy my day, and walked away. But his younger partner also had something to say:

"A piece of advice to you," he muttered slightly self-consciously. "If you ever have a son who wants to be in the ChronoGuard, try and dissuade him."

He smiled and followed his partner in their quest for my father.

"What was that son thing about?" asked Landen.

"I don't know. He looked kind of familiar, though, didn't he?"

"Kinda."

"Where were we?"

"Mrs. Parke-Laine?" asked a very stocky individual, who stared at me earnestly from two deep-set brown eyes.

"SO-12?" I asked, wondering quite where the little beetle-browed man had sprung from.

"No, ma'am," he replied, seizing a plum from a passing waiter and sniffing at it carefully before eating it, stone and all. "My name Bartholomew Stiggins; with SO-13."

"What do *they* do?"

"Not at liberty to discuss," he replied shortly, "but we may have need your skills and talents."

"What kind of--"

But Mr. Stiggins was no longer listening to me. Instead, he was staring at a small beetle he had found on a flowerpot. With great care and a dexterity that belied his large and clumsy-looking hands, he picked the small bug up and popped it in his mouth. I looked at Landen, who winced.

"Sorry," said Stiggins, as though he had just been caught picking his nose in public. "What the expression? Old habits die hard?"

"There's more in the compost heap," said Landen helpfully.

The little man grinned very softly through his eyes; I didn't suppose he showed much emotion.

"If interested, I'll be in touch."

"Be in touch," I told him.

He grunted, replaced his hat, bid us both a happy day, inquired about the whereabouts of the compost heap and was gone.

"I've never seen a Neanderthal in a suit before," observed Landen.

"Never mind about Mr. Stiggins," I said, reaching up to kiss him.

"I thought you'd finished with SpecOps?"

"No," I replied with a smile. "In fact, I think I'm only just beginning!  
..."

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's Imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

THURSDAY NEXT

IN

*Lost  
in a  
Good Book*

A NOVEL

**Jasper Fforde**



PENGUIN BOOKS



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

*Lost in a Good Book*

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*This Book*

is dedicated to assistants everywhere.

*You* make it happen for them.

*They* couldn't do it without you.

*Your* contribution is everything.

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# 1.

## *The Adrian Lush Show*

Sample viewing figures for major TV networks in England, September 1985

### NETWORK TOAD

*The Adrian Lush Show* (Wednesday) (Chat show) 16,428,316

*The Adrian Lush Show* (Monday) (Chat show) 16,034,921

*Bonzo the Wonder Hound* (Canine thriller) 15,975,462

### MOLETV

*Name That Fruit!* (Answer questions for cash prizes) 15,320,340

*65 Walrus Street* (Soap opera; Episode 3,352) 14,315,902

*Dangerously Dysfunctional People Argue Live on TV* (Chat show) 11,065,611

### OWLVISION

*Will Marlowe or Kit Shakespeare?* (Literary quiz show) 13,591,203

*One More Chance to See!* (Reverse extinction show) 2,321,820

### GOLIATH CABLE CHANNEL (1 TO 32)

*Whose Lie Is It Anyway?* (Corporate comedy quiz show) 428

*Cots to Coffins: Goliath. All you'll ever need.* (Docuganda) 9 (disputed)

### NEANDERTHAL CABLE NETWORK 4

*Powertool Club Live* (Routers and power planers edition) 9,032

*Jackanory Gold* ( *Jane Eyre* edition) 7,219

WARWICK FRIDGE,  
*The Ratings War*

I DIDN'T ASK to be a celebrity. I never wanted to appear on *The Adrian Lush Show*. And let's get one thing straight right now--the world would have to be hurtling toward imminent destruction before I'd agree to anything as dopey as *The Thursday Next Workout Video*.

The publicity surrounding the successful rebookment of *Jane Eyre* was fun to begin with but rapidly grew wearisome. I happily posed for photocalls, agreed to newspaper interviews, hesitantly appeared on *Desert Island Smells* and was thankfully excused the embarrassment of *Celebrity Name That Fruit*. The public, ever fascinated by celebrity, had wanted to know *everything* about me following my excursion within the pages of *Jane Eyre*, and since the Special Operations Network have a PR record on par with that of Vlad the Impaler, the Top Brass



thought it would be a good wheeze to use me to boost their flagging popularity. I dutifully toured all points of the globe doing signings, library openings, talks and interviews. The same questions, the same SpecOps-approved answers. Supermarket openings, literary dinners, offers of book deals. I even met the actress Lola Vavoom, who said that she would simply *adore* to play me if there was a film. It was tiring, but more than that--*it was dull*. For the first time in my career at the Literary Detectives I actually missed authenticating Milton.

I'd taken a week's leave as soon my tour ended so Landen and I could devote some time to married life. I moved all my stuff to his house, rearranged his furniture, added my books to his and introduced my dodo, Pickwick, to his new home. Landen and I ceremoniously partitioned the bedroom closet space, decided to *share* the sock drawer, then had an argument over who was to sleep on the wall side of the bed. We had long and wonderfully pointless conversations about nothing in particular, walked Pickwick in the park, went out to dinner, stayed in for dinner, stared at each other a lot and slept in late every morning. It was *wonderful*.

On the fourth day of my leave, just between lunch with Landen's mum and Pickwick's notable first fight with the neighbor's cat, I got a call from Cordelia Flakk. She was the senior SpecOps PR agent here in Swindon and she told me that Adrian Lush wanted me on his show. I wasn't mad keen on the idea--or the show. But there was an upside. *The Adrian Lush Show* went out live, and Flakk assured me that this would be a "no holds barred" interview, something that held a great deal of appeal. Despite my many appearances, the true story about *JaneEyre* was yet to be told--and I had been wanting to drop the Goliath Corporation in it for quite a while. Flakk's assurance that this would finally be the end of the press junket clinched my decision. Adrian Lush it would be.

I traveled up to the Network Toad studios a few days later on my own; Landen had a deadline looming and needed to get his head down. But I wasn't alone for long. As soon as I stepped into the large entrance lobby a milk-curdling shade of green strode purposefully towards me.

"Thursday, *darling!*" cried Cordelia, beads rattling. "So glad you could make it!"

The SpecOps dress code stated that our apparel should be "dignified," but in Cordelia's case they had obviously stretched a point. She looked about as far from a serving officer as one could get. Looks, in her case, were highly deceptive. She was SpecOps all the way from her high heels to the pink-and-yellow scarf tied in her hair.

She air-kissed me affectionately. "How's married life treating you?"

"Very well."

"Excellent, my dear, I wish you and . . . er . . ."

"Landen?"

"Yes; I wish you and Landen both the best. *Love* what you've done with your hair!"

"My hair? I haven't done anything with my hair!"

"Exactly!" replied Flakk quickly. "It's so incredibly *you*. What do you think of the outfit?"

"One's attention is drawn straight to it," I replied ambiguously.

"This is 1985," she explained. "Bright colors are the future. See this top? Half price in the sales. I'll let you loose in my wardrobe one day."

"I think I've got some pink socks of my own somewhere."

She smiled.

"It's a start, my dear. Listen, you've been a shining star about all this publicity work; I'm very grateful--and so is SpecOps."

"Grateful enough to post me somewhere other than the Literary Detectives?" I asked hopefully.

"Well," murmured Cordelia reflectively, "first things first. As soon as you've done the Lush interview your transfer application will be aggressively considered, you have my word on *that*."

I sighed. "Aggressively considered" had the ring of "definitely perhaps" about it and wasn't as promising as I could have wished. Despite the successes at work, I still wanted to move up within the Network. Cordelia, reading my disappointment, took my arm in a friendly gesture and steered me towards the waiting area.

"Coffee?"

"Thanks."

"Spot of bother in Auckland?"

"Bronte Federation offshoot caused a bit of trouble," I explained. "They didn't like the new ending of *Jane Eyre*."

"There'll always be a few malcontents," observed Flakk with a smile. "Milk?"

"Just a tad."

"Oh," she said, staring at the milk jug, "this milk's off. No matter. Listen," she said quietly, "I'd love to stay and watch, but some SpecOps-17 clot in Penzance staked a Goth by mistake; it's going to be PR hell on earth down there."

SO-17 were the Vampire and Werewolf Disposal Operation. Despite a new three-point confirmation procedure, a jumpy cadet with a sharpened stake could still spell *big* trouble.

"Everything is all absolutely hunky-dory here. I've spoken to Adrian Lush and the others so there won't be any embarrassments."

"No holds barred, eh?" I grimaced, but Flakk was unapologetic.

"Needs must, Thursday. SpecOps requires your support in these difficult times. President Formby *himself* has called for an inquiry into

whether SpecOps are value-for-money--or even necessary at all."

"Okay," I agreed, quite against my better judgment, "but this is the *very last interview*, yes?"

"Of course!" agreed Flakk hastily, then added in an overdramatic manner: "Oh my goodness is that the time? I have to catch the airship to Barnstaple in an hour. This is Adie; she'll be looking after you and . . . and--" here Cordelia leaned just a little bit closer--"remember you're SpecOps, darling!"

She air-kissed me again, glanced at her watch and took to her heels in a cloud of expensive scent.

"How could I forget?" I muttered as a bouncy girl clutching a clipboard appeared from where she had been waiting respectfully out of earshot.

"Hi!" squeaked the girl. "I'm Adie. I'm so pleased to meet you!"

She grasped my hand and told me repeatedly what a *fantastic* honor it was.

"I don't want to bug you or anything," she asked shyly, "but was Edward Rochester *really* drop-dead-gorgeous-to-die-for?"

"Not handsome," I answered as I watched Flakk slink off down the corridor, "but certainly attractive. Tall, deep voice and glowering looks, if you know the type."

Adie turned a deep shade of pink.

"Gosh!"

I was taken into makeup, where I was puffed and primped, talked at mercilessly and made to sign copies of the *FeMole* I had appeared in. I was very relieved when Adie came to rescue me thirty minutes later. She announced into her wireless that we were "walking" and then, after leading me down a corridor and through some swing doors, asked:

"What's it like working in SpecOps? Do you chase bad guys, clamber around on the outside of airships, defuse bombs with three seconds to go, that sort of stuff?"

"I wish I did," I replied good-humoredly, "but in truth it's 70% form filling, 27% mind-numbing tedium and 2% sheer terror."

"And the remaining 1%?"

I smiled. "That's what keeps us going."

We walked the seemingly endless corridors, past large grinning photographs of Adrian Lush and assorted other Network-Toad celebrities.

"You'll like Adrian," she told me happily, "and he'll like you. Just don't try to be funnier than him; it doesn't suit the format of the show."

"What does *that* mean?"

She shrugged.

"I don't know. I'm meant to tell all his guests that."

"Even the comedians?"

"*Especially* the comedians."

I assured her being funny was furthest from my mind, and pretty soon she directed me onto the studio floor. Feeling unusually nervous and wishing that Landen was with me, I walked across the familiar front-room set of *The Adrian Lush Show*. But Mr. Lush was nowhere to be seen--and neither were the "Live Studio Audience" a Lush show usually boasted. Instead, a small group of officials were waiting--the "others" Flakk had told me about. My heart fell when I saw who they were.

"Ah, there you are, Next!" boomed Commander Braxton Hicks with forced bonhomie. "You're looking well, healthy, and, er, vigorous." He was my divisional chief back at Swindon, and despite being head of the Literary Detectives, was not that good with words.

"What are you doing here, sir?" I asked him, straining not to show my disappointment. "Cordelia told me the Lush interview would be uncensored in every way."

"Oh it *is*, dear girl--up to a point," he said, stroking his large mustache. "Without benign intervention things can get very confused in the public mind. We thought we would listen to the interview and perhaps--if the need arose--offer *practical advice* as to how the proceedings should--er--proceed."

I sighed. My untold story looked set to remain exactly that. Adrian Lush, supposed champion of free speech, the man who had dared to air the grievances felt by the neanderthal, the first to suggest publicly that the Goliath Corporation "had shortcomings," was about to have his nails well and truly clipped.

"Colonel Flanker you've already met," went on Braxton without drawing breath.

I eyed the man suspiciously. I knew him well enough. He was at SpecOps-1, the division that polices SpecOps itself. He had interviewed me about the night I had first tried to tackle master criminal Acheron Hades--the night Snood and Tamworth died. He tried to smile several times but eventually gave up and offered his hand for me to shake instead.

"This is Colonel Rabone," carried on Braxton. "She is head of Combined Forces Liaison." I shook hands with the colonel.

"Always honored to meet a holder of the Crimean Cross," she said, smiling.

"And over here," continued Braxton in a jocular tone that was obviously designed to put me at ease--a ploy that failed spectacularly--"is Mr. Schitt-Hawse of the Goliath Corporation."

Schitt-Hawse was a tall, thin man whose pinched features seemed to

compete for position in the center of his face. His head tilted to the left in a manner that reminded me of an inquisitive budgerigar, and his dark hair was fastidiously combed back from his forehead. He put out his hand.

"Would it upset you if I didn't shake it?" I asked him.

"Well, yes," he replied, trying to be affable.

"Good."

The Goliath Corporation's pernicious hold over the nation was not universally appreciated, and I had a far greater reason to dislike them--the last Goliath employee I had dealt with was an odious character by the name of Jack Schitt. We had tricked him into a copy of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," a place in which I hoped he could do no harm.

"Schitt-Hawse, eh?" I said. "Any relation to Jack?"

"He was--is--my half brother," said Schitt-Hawse slowly, "and believe me, Ms. Next, he wasn't working for us when he planned to prolong the Crimean War in order to create demand for Goliath weaponry."

"And you never knew he had sided with Hades either, I suppose?"

"Of course not!" replied Schitt-Hawse in an offended tone.

"If you had known, would you admit it?"

Schitt-Hawse scowled and said nothing. Braxton coughed politely and continued:

"And this is Mr. Chesterman of the Bronte Federation."

Chesterman blinked at me uncertainly. The changes I had wrought upon *Jane Eyre* had split the federation. I hoped he was one of the ones who preferred the happier ending.

"Back there is Captain Marat of the ChronoGuard," continued Braxton. Marat, at this moment in *his* time, was a schoolboy of about twelve. He looked at me with interest. The ChronoGuard were the SpecOps division that took care of Anomalous Time Ripplation--my father *had been* one or *was* one or *would* be one, depending on how you looked at it.

"Have we met before?" I asked him.

"Not yet," he replied cheerfully, returning to his copy of *The Beano*.

"Well!" said Braxton, clapping his hands together. "I think that's everyone. Next, I want you to pretend *we're just not here*."

"Observers, yes?"

"Absolutely. I--"

Braxton was interrupted by a slight disturbance offstage.

"The bastards!" yelled a high voice. "If the network dares to replace my Monday slot with reruns of *Bonzo the Wonder Hound* I'll sue them for every penny they have!"

A tall man of perhaps fifty-five had walked into the studio accompanied by a small group of assistants. He had handsome

chiseled features and a luxuriant swirl of white hair that looked as though it had been carved from polystyrene. He wore an immaculately tailored suit and his fingers were heavily weighed down with gold jewelry. He stopped short when he saw us.

"Ah!" said Adrian Lush disdainfully. "SpecOps!"

His entourage flustered around him with lots of energy but very little purpose. They seemed to hang on his every word and action, and I suddenly felt a great sense of relief that I wasn't in the entertainments business.

"I've had a lot to do with you people in the past," explained Lush as he made himself comfortable on his trademark green sofa, something he clearly regarded as a territorial safe retreat. "It was I that coined the phrase 'SpecOps' whenever you make a mistake--sorry, 'Operational unexpectation'--isn't that what you like to call them?"

But Hicks ignored Lush's inquiries and introduced me as though I were his only daughter being offered up for marriage.

"Mr. Lush, this is Special Operative Thursday Next."

Lush jumped up and bounded over to shake me by the hand in an effusive and energetic manner. Flanker and the others sat down; they looked very small in the middle of the empty studio. They weren't going to leave and Lush wasn't going to ask them to--I knew that Goliath owned Network Toad and was beginning to doubt whether Lush had any control over this interview at all.

"Hello, Thursday!" said Lush excitedly. "Welcome to my Monday show. It's the second-highest-rated show in England-- my Wednesday show is the first!"

He laughed infectiously and I smiled uneasily.

"Then this will be your *Thursday* show," I replied, eager to lighten the situation.

There was dead silence.

"Will you be doing that a lot?" asked Lush in a subdued tone.

"Doing what?"

"Making jokes. You see . . . have a seat, darling. You see, I *generally* make the jokes on this show and although it's *perfectly* okay for you to make jokes, then I'm going to have to pay someone to write funnier ones, and our budget, like Goliath's scruples, is on the small side of Leptonic."

"Can I say something?" said a voice from the small audience. It was Flanker, who carried on talking without waiting for a reply. "SpecOps is a serious business and should be reflected so in your interview. Next, I think you should let Mr. Lush tell the jokes."

"Is that all right?" asked Lush, beaming.

"Sure," I replied. "Is there anything else I shouldn't do?"

Lush looked at me and then looked at the panel in the front row.

"Is there?"

They all mumbled among themselves for a few seconds.

"I think," said Flanker again, "that we--sorry, *you*--should just do the interview and then we can discuss it later. Miss Next can say whatever she wants as long as it doesn't contravene any SpecOps or Goliath Corporate guidelines."

"--or military," added Colonel Rabone, anxious not to be left out.

"Is that okay?" asked Lush.

"Whatever," I returned, eager to get on with it.

"Excellent! I'll do your intro, although you'll be off camera for that. The floor manager will cue you and you'll enter. Wave to where the audience might have been and when you are comfy, I'll ask you some questions. I may offer you some toast at some point as our sponsors, the Toast Marketing Board, like to get a plug in now and again. Is there any part of that you don't understand?"

"No."

"Good. Here we go."

There was a flurry of activity as Lush had his hair adjusted, his makeup checked and his costume tweaked. After a cursory glance at me I was ushered offstage and after what seemed like an epoch of inaction, Lush was counted in by a floor manager. On cue he turned to camera one and switched on his best and brightest smile.

"Tonight is a very special occasion with a very special guest. She is a decorated war heroine, a literary detective whose personal intervention not only restored the novel of *Jane Eyre* but actually improved the ending. She single-handedly defeated Acheron Hades, ended the Crimean War and boldly hoodwinked the Goliath Corporation. Ladies and gentlemen, in an unprecedented interview from a serving SpecOps officer, please give a warm welcome to Thursday Next of the Swindon Literary Detective office!"

A bright light swung onto my entrance doorway, and Adie smiled and tapped my arm. I walked out to meet Lush, who rose to greet me enthusiastically.

"Excuse me," came a voice from the small group sitting in the front row of the empty auditorium. It was Schitt-Hawse, the Goliath representative.

"Yes?" asked Lush in an icy tone.

"You're going to have to drop the reference to the Goliath Corporation," said Schitt-Hawse in the sort of tone that brooks no argument. "It serves no purpose other than to needlessly embarrass a large company that is doing its very best to improve everyone's lives."

"I agree," said Flanker. "And all references to Hades will have to be avoided. He is still listed as 'Missing, fervently hoped dead,' so any unauthorized speculation might have dangerous consequences."

"Okay," murmured Lush, scribbling a note. "Anything else?"

"Any reference to the Crimean War and the Plasma Rifle," said the colonel, "might be considered *inappropriate*. The peace talks at Budapest are still at a delicate stage; the Russians will make any excuse to leave the table. We know that your show is very popular in Moscow."

"The Bronte Federation is not keen for you to say the new ending is *improved*," put in the small and bespectacled Chesterman, "and talking about any of the characters you met within *Jane Eyre* might cause some viewers to suffer Xplkqul-kiccasia."

The condition was unknown before my jump into *Eyre*. It was so serious that the Medical Council were compelled to make up an *especially* unpronounceable word to describe it.

Lush looked at them, looked at me and then looked at his script.

"How about if I just said her name?"

"That would be admirable," intoned Flanker, "except you might also want to assure the viewers that this interview is uncensored. Everyone else agree?"

They all enthusiastically added their assent to Flanker's suggestion. I could see this was going to be a very long and tedious afternoon.

Lush's entourage came back on and made the tiniest adjustments, I was repositioned, and after waiting what seemed like another decade, Lush began again.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in a frank and open interview tonight, Thursday Next talks unhindered about her work at SpecOps."

No one said anything, so I entered, shook Lush's hand and took a seat on his sofa.

"Welcome to the show, Thursday."

"Thank you."

"We'll get on to your career in the Crimea in a moment, but I'd like to kick off by asking--"

With a magician's flourish he pulled a serviette off the table in front of us, revealing a platter of toast with assorted toppings.

"--if you would care for some toast?"

"No, thanks."

"Tasty and nutritious!" He smiled, facing the camera. "Perfect as a snack or even a light meal--good with eggs, sardines or even--"

"No, thank you."

Lush's smile froze on his face as he muttered through clenched teeth:

"Have . . . some . . . toast."

But it was too late. The floor manager came on the set and announced that the unseen director of the show had called *cut*. Lush's face dropped its permanent smile and his small army of beauticians



came on and fussed over him once more. The floor manager had a one-way conversation into his headphones before turning to me with a concerned expression on his face.

"The Director of Placements wants to know if you would take a small bite of toast when offered."

"I've eaten already."

The floor manager turned and spoke into his headphones again.

"*She says she's eaten already!* . . . I know. . . . Yes. . . . What if . . . Yes. . . . Ah-ha. . . . *What do you want me to do? Sit on her and force it down her throat!?! . . . Yesss. . . . Ah-ha. . . . I know. . . . Yes. . . . Yes. . . . Okay.*"

He turned back to me.

"How about jam instead of marmalade?"

"I don't *really* like toast," I told him--which was partly true, although to be honest I think I was just feeling a bit troublesome because of Braxton and his entourage.

"What?"

"I said I don't--"

"She says she doesn't like toast!" said the floor manager in an exasperated tone. "*What in hell's name are we going to do!?!'*"

Flanker stood up.

"Next, eat the sodding toast will you? I've got a meeting in two hours."

"And I've a golf tournament," added Braxton.

I sighed. I thought perhaps I had a small amount of control on the show, but even that had vanished.

"Does marmalade fit in with your plans, sir?" I asked Braxton, who grunted in the affirmative and sat down again.

"Okay. Make it granary with marmalade, go easy on the butter."

The floor manager smiled as though I had just saved his job--which I probably had--and everything started over once again.

"Would you like some toast?" asked Lush.

"Thanks."

I took a small bite. Everyone was watching me, so I decided to make it easy for them.

"Very good indeed."

I saw the floor manager giving me an enthusiastic thumbs-up as he dabbed his brow with a handkerchief.

"Right," sighed Lush. "Let's get on with it. First I would like to ask the question that everyone wants to know: How did you actually get into the book of *Jane Eyre* in the first place?"

"That's easily explained," I began. "You see, my uncle Mycroft invented a device called a Prose Portal--"

Flanker coughed. I could sense what he was going to say and I

cursed myself for being so foolish as to believe *The Adrian Lush Show* would be uncensored. I was SpecOps, after all.

"Ms. Next," began Flanker, "perhaps you don't know it but your uncle is still the subject of a secrecy certificate dating back to 1934. It might be prudent if you didn't mention him--or the Prose Portal."

The floor manager yelled, "We've cut!" again and Lush thought for a moment.

"Can we talk about how Hades stole the manuscript of *Martin Chuzzlewit*?"

"Let me think," replied Flanker, then after a tiny pause, said: "No."

"It's not something we want the citizenry to think is--" said Marat so suddenly that quite a few people jumped. Up until that moment he hadn't said a word.

"Sorry?" asked Flanker.

"Nothing," said the ChronoGuard operative, who was now in his mid-sixties. "I'm just getting a touch proleptic in my old age."

"Can we talk about the successful return of Jane to her book?" I asked wearily.

"I refer you to my previous answer," growled Flanker.

"How about the time my partner Bowden and I drove through a patch of bad time on the motorway?"

"It's not something we want the citizenry to think is easy," said Marat--who was now in his early twenties--with renewed enthusiasm. "If the public think that ChronoGuard work is straightforward, confidence might well be shaken."

"Quite correct," asserted Flanker.

"Perhaps you'd like to do this interview?" I asked him.

"Hey!" said Flanker, standing up and jabbing a finger in my direction. "There's no need to get snippy with us, Next. You're here to do a job in your capacity as a serving SpecOps officer. You are *not* here to tell the truth as you see it!"

Lush looked uneasily at me; I raised my eyebrows and shrugged.

"Now look here," said Lush in a strident tone, "if I'm going to interview Ms. Next I must ask questions that the public want to hear!"

"Oh, you can!" said Flanker agreeably. "You can ask whatever you want. Free speech is enshrined in statute, and neither SpecOps nor Goliath have any business to coerce you in any way. We are just here to observe, comment, and *enlighten*."

Lush knew what Flanker meant and Flanker knew that Lush knew. I knew that Flanker and Lush knew it and they both knew I knew it too. Lush looked nervous and fidgeted slightly. Flanker's assertion of Lush's independence was anything but. A word To Network Toad from Goliath and Lush would end up presenting *Sheep World* on Lerwick TV, and he didn't want that. Not one little bit.

We fell silent for a moment as Lush and I tried to figure out a topic that was outside their broad parameters.

"How about commenting on the ludicrously high tax on cheese?" I asked. It was a joke, but Flanker and Co. weren't terribly expert when it came to jokes.

"I have no objection," murmured Flanker. "Anyone else?"

"Not me," said Schitt-Hawse.

"Or me," added Rabone.

"I have an objection," said a woman who had been sitting quietly at the side of the studio. She spoke with a clipped home counties accent and was dressed in a tweed skirt, twinset and pearls.

"Allow me to introduce myself," she said in a loud and strident voice. "Mrs. Jolly Hilly, Governmental Representative to the Television Networks." She took a deep breath and carried on: "The so-called 'unfair cheese duty burden' is a very contentious subject at present. Any reference to it might be construed as an inflammatory act."

"587% duty on hard cheeses and 620% on smelly?" I asked. "Cheddar Classic Gold Original at PS9.32 a pound--Bodmin Molecular Unstable Brie at almost PS10! What's going on?"

The others, suddenly interested, all looked to Mrs. Hilly for an explanation. For a brief moment and probably the only moment ever, we were in agreement.

"I understand your concern," replied the trained apologist, "but I think you'll find that the price of cheese has, once adjusted for positive spin, actually gone *down* measured against the retail price index in recent years. Here, have a look at this."

She passed me a picture of a sweet little old lady on crutches.

"Old ladies who are not dissimilar to the actress in this picture will have to go without their hip replacements and suffer crippling pain if you selfishly demand cut-price cheese."

She paused to let this sink in.

"The Master of the Sums feels that it is not for the public to dictate economic policy, but he is willing to make concessions for those who suffer particular hardship in the form of area-tactical needs-related cheese coupons."

"So," said Lush with a smile, "*wheyving* cheese tax is out of the question?"

"Or he could raise the custard duty," added Mrs. Hilly, missing the pun. "The pudding lobby is less--well--how should I put it--*militant*."

"*Wheyving*," said Lush again, for the benefit of anyone who had missed it. "*Wheyve*--oh, never mind. I've never heard a bigger load of crap in all my life. I aim to make the ludicrous price of cheese the subject of an Adrian Lush Special Report."

Mrs. Hilly flushed slightly and chose her words carefully.

"If there were another cheese riot following your Special Report we might look very carefully as to where to place responsibility."

She looked at the Goliath representative as she said this. The implication wasn't lost on Schitt-Hawse or Lush. I had heard enough.

"So I won't talk about cheese either," I sighed. "What *can* I talk about?"

The small group all looked at one another with perplexed expressions. Flanker clicked his fingers as an idea struck him.

"Don't you own a dodo?"

## 2.

### The Special Operations Network

The Special Operations Network was initiated to handle policing duties considered either too unusual or too specialized to be tackled by the regular force. There were thirty-two departments in all, starting at the more mundane Horticultural Enforcement Agency (SO-32) and going on to Literary Detectives (SO-27) and Transport Authority (SO-21). Anything below SO-20 was restricted information, although it was common knowledge that the ChronoGuard were SO-12 and SO-1 were the department that polices the SpecOps themselves. Quite what the others do is anyone's guess. What is known is that the individual operatives themselves are mostly ex-military or ex-police. Operatives rarely leave the service after the probationary period has ended. There is a saying: "A SpecOps job isn't for probation--it's for life."

MILLON DE FLOSS,

*A Short History of the Special Operations Network* (revised)

It was the morning after the transmission of *The Adrian Lush Show*. I had watched for five minutes, cringed, then fled upstairs to rearrange our sock drawer. I managed to file all the socks by color, shape and how much I liked them before Landen told me it was all over and I could come back downstairs. It was the last public interview I'd agreed to give, but Cordelia didn't seem to remember this part of our conversation. She had continued to besiege me with requests to speak at literary festivals, appear as a guest on *65 Walrus Street* and even attend one of President Formby's informal song-and-ukulele evenings. Job offers arrived daily. Numerous libraries and private security firms asked for my services as either "Active Associate" or "Security Consultant." The sweetest letter I got was from the local library asking me to come in and read to the elderly--something I delighted in doing. But SpecOps itself, the body to which I had committed much of my adult life, energy and resources, hadn't even *spoken* to me about advancement. As far as they were concerned I was SO-27 and would remain so until they decided otherwise.

"Mail for you!" announced Landen, dumping a large pile of post onto the kitchen table. Most of my mail these days was fan mail--and pretty strange it was, too. I opened an envelope at random.

"Anyone I should be jealous of?" he asked.

"I should keep the divorce lawyer on hold for a few more minutes--it's another request for underwear."

"I'll send him a pair of mine," grinned Landen.

"What's in the parcel?"

"Late wedding present. It's a--"

He looked at the strange knitted object curiously.

"It's a . . . *thing*."

"Good," I replied, "I always wanted one of those. What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to teach Pickwick to stand on one leg."

"Dodos don't do tricks," I told him.

"For a marshmallow I think I can make him do anything. Up, Pickwick, come on, one leg, up!"

Landen was a writer. We first met when he, my brother Anton and I fought in the Crimea. Landen came home minus a leg but alive--my brother was still out there, making his way through eternity from the comfort of a military cemetery near Sevastopol. I opened another letter and read aloud:

*"Dear Miss Next, I am one of your biggest fans. I thought you should know that I believe David Copperfield, far from being the doe-eyed innocent, actually murdered his first wife, Dora Spenslow, in order to marry Agnes Wickfield. I suggest an exhumation of Miss Spenslow's remains and a test for botulism and/or arsenic. While we are on the subject, have you ever stopped to wonder why Homer changed his mind about dogs somewhere between the Iliad and the Odyssey? Was he, perhaps, given a puppy between the two? Another thing: Do you find Joyce's Ulysses as boring and as unintelligible as I do? And why don't Hemingway's works have any smells in them?"*

"Seems everyone wants you to investigate their favorite book," observed Landen, sliding his arms around my neck and looking over my shoulder so closely our cheeks touched and I shivered. He put his mouth close to my ear and whispered:

"While you're about it can you try and get Tess acquitted and Max de Winter convicted?"

"Not you as well!"

I took the marshmallow from his hand and ate it, much to Pickwick's shock and dismay. Landen took another marshmallow from the jar and tried again.

"Up, Pickwick, come on, *up, up*, one leg!"

Pickwick stared at Landen blankly, eyes fixed on the marshmallow and not at all interested in learning tricks.

"You'll need a truckload of them, Land."

I refolded the letter, finished my coffee, got up and put on my jacket.

"Have a good day," said Landen, seeing me to the door. "Be nice to the other children. No scratching or biting."

"I'll behave myself. I promise."

I wrapped my arms round his neck and kissed him.

"Mmm," I whispered softly. "That was nice."

"I've been practicing," he told me, "on that pretty young thing at number 56. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," I replied, kissing him again, "so long as you want to keep your other leg."

"O-kay. I think I'll stick to you for practice from now on."

"I'm depending on it. Oh, and Land?"

"Yuh?"

"Don't forget it's Mycroft's retirement party this evening."

"I won't."

We bade each other goodbye and I walked down the garden path, shouting a greeting to Mrs. Arturo, who had been watching us.

It was late autumn or early winter--I wasn't sure which. It had been mild and windless; the leaves were still brown on the trees and on some days it was hardly cold at all. It had to *really* get chilly to put the top up on my Speedster, so I drove into the SpecOps divisional HQ with the wind in my hair and WESSEX-FM blaring on the wireless. The upcoming election was the talk of the airwaves; the controversial cheese duty had suddenly become an issue in the way things do just before an election. There was a snippet about Goliath declaring themselves to be "the world's favorite conglomerate" for the tenth year running whilst in the Crimean peace talks Russia had demanded Kent County as war reparations. In sport, Aubrey Jambe had led the Swindon Mallets croquet team into SuperHoop '85 by thrashing the Reading Whackers.

I drove through the morning traffic in Swindon and parked the Speedster at the rear of the SpecOps HQ. The building was of a brusque no-nonsense Germanic design; hastily erected during the occupation, the facade still bore battle scars from Swindon's liberation in 1949. It housed most of the SpecOps divisions but not all. Our Vampire and Werewolf Disposal Operation also encompassed Reading and Salisbury, and in return Salisbury's Art Theft division looked after our area as well. It all seemed to work quite well.

"Hullo!" I said to a young man who was taking a cardboard box out of the boot of his car. "New SpecOps?"

"Er, yes," he replied, putting down his box for a moment to offer me his hand.

"John Smith--Weeds & Seeds."

"Unusual name," I said, shaking his hand, "I'm Thursday Next."

"Oh!" he said, looking at me with interest. Sadly my anonymity had, it seemed, departed for good.

"Yes," I replied, picking up several large box files for him, "*that* Thursday Next. Weeds & Seeds?"

"Domestic Horticulture Enforcement Agency," explained John as we

walked towards the SpecOps building. "SO-32. I'm starting an office here. There's been a rise in the number of hackers just recently. The Pampas Grass Vigilante Squad are becoming more brazen in their activities; pampas grass might well be an eyesore, but there's nothing illegal in it."

We showed our ID cards to the desk sergeant and walked up the stairs to the second floor.

"I heard something about that," I murmured. "Any links to the Anti-Leylandii Association?"

"Nothing positive," replied Smith, "but I'm following all leads."

"How many in your squad?"

"Including me, one," grinned Smith. "Thought you were the most underfunded department in SpecOps? Think again. I've got six months to sort out the hackers, get the Japanese knotweed under control and find an acceptable plural form of *narcissus*."

We reached the upstairs corridor and a small office that had once been home to SO-31, the Good Taste Education Authority. The division had been disbanded a month ago when the proposed legislation against stone cladding, pictures of crying clowns, and floral-patterned carpets failed in the upper house. I placed the box files on the table, told him *narcissi* was my favorite, wished him well and left him to unpack.

I was just walking past the office of SO-14 when I heard a shrill voice.

"Thursday! Thursday, yoo-hoo! Over here!"

I sighed. It was Cordelia Flakk. She quickly caught up with me and gave me an affectionate hug.

"The Lush show was a disaster!" I told her. "You said it was no-holds-barred! I ended up talking about dodos, my car and anything but *Jane Eyre*!"

"You were *terrific*!" she enthused. "I've got you lined up for another set of interviews the day after tomorrow."

"No more, Cordelia."

She looked crestfallen.

"I don't understand."

"What part of *no more* don't you understand?"

"Don't be like that, Thursday," she replied, smiling broadly. "You're good PR, and believe me, in an institution that routinely leaves the public perforated, confused, old before their time or, if they're lucky, dead, we need every bit of good PR we can muster."

"Do we do *that* much damage to the public?" I asked.

Flakk smiled modestly.

"Perhaps my PR is not so bad after all," she conceded, then added quickly: "But every Joe that gets trounced in a crossfire is one too



many."

"That's as may be," I retorted, "but the fact remains you told me the Lush show would be the last."

"Ah! But I *also* told you the Lush show would be no-holds-barred, didn't I?" observed Cordelia brightly, displaying staggering reverse logic.

"However you want to spin it, Cordelia, the answer is still *no*."

As I watched with a certain detached amusement, Flakk went through a bizarre routine that included hopping up and down for a bit, pulling pleading expressions, wringing her hands, puffing out her cheeks and staring at the ceiling.

"Okay," I sighed, "you've got my attention. What do you want me to do?"

"Well," said Cordelia excitedly, "we ran a competition!"

"Oh yes?" I asked suspiciously, wondering whether it could be any more daft than her "win a mammoth" idea the week before. "What sort of competition?"

"Well, we thought it would be a good idea if you met a few members of the public on a one-to-one basis."

"Did we? Now listen, Cordelia--"

"Dilly, Thursday, since we're pals."

She sensed my reticence and added:

"Cords, then. Or Delia. How about Flakky? I used to be called Flik-flak at school. Can I call you Thurs?"

"*Cordelia!*" I said in a harsher tone, before she ingratiated herself to death. "*I'm not going to do this!* You said the Lush interview would be the last, and it is."

I started to walk away, but when God was handing out insistence, Cordelia Flakk was right at the front of the queue.

"Thursday, this hurts me *really* personally when you're like this. It attacks me right--right--er--here."

She made a wild guess at where her heart might be and looked at me with a pained expression that she probably learnt off a springer spaniel.

"I've got them waiting right here, *now*, in the canteen. It won't take a moment, ten minutes *tops*. Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease. I've only asked two dozen journalists and news crews--the room will be practically empty."

I looked at my watch.

"Ten minutes, <sup>1</sup> whoa!--Who's that?"

"Who's what?"

"Someone calling my name. Didn't you hear it?"

"No," replied Cordelia, looking at me oddly.

I tapped my ears and looked around to see if there was anyone close

by. Apart from Cordelia, we were alone in the corridor. It had sounded so real it was disconcerting.<sup>2</sup>

"There it goes again!"

"There goes what again?"

"A man's voice! Speaking *here* inside my head!"

I pointed to my temple to demonstrate. Cordelia took a step backwards, her look turning to one of consternation.

"Are you okay, Thursday? Can I call someone?"

"Oh. No no, I'm fine. I just realized I--ah--left a receiver in my ear. It must be my partner; there's a 12-14 or a 10-30 or . . . *something* numerological in progress. Tell your competition winners another time. Goodbye!"

I dashed off down the corridor toward the Literary Detectives offices. There wasn't a receiver, of course, but I wasn't having Flakk tell the quacks I was hearing voices.<sup>3</sup> I stopped and looked around. The corridor was empty.

"I can *hear* you," I said, "but where are you?"<sup>4</sup>

"Her name's Flakk. Works over at SpecOps PR."<sup>5</sup>

"What is this? SpecOps Blind Date? *What's going on?*"<sup>6</sup>

"Case? What case? I haven't done anything!"<sup>7</sup>

My indignation was real. For someone who had spent her life enforcing law and order, it seemed a grave injustice that I should be accused of something--especially something I knew nothing about.

"For God's sake, Snell, what is the charge?"

"Are you okay, Next?"

It was Commander Braxton Hicks. He had just turned the corner and was staring at me with curiosity.

"Nothing, sir," I said, thinking fast. "The SpecOps tensionologist said I should vocalize any stress regarding past experiences. Listen: '*Get away from me, Hades, go!*' See? I feel better already."

"Oh!" said Hicks doubtfully. "Well, the quacks know best, I suppose. That Lush fellow's interview was a cracker, don't you think?"

Thankfully he didn't give me time to answer and carried on talking.

"Listen here, Next, did you sign that picture for my godson Max?"

"On your desk, sir."

"Really? Jolly good. What else? Oh yes. That PR girlie--"

"Miss Flakk?"

"That's the chap. She ran a competition or something. Would you liaise with her over it?"

"I'll make it my top priority, sir."

"Good. Well, carry on vocalizing then."

"Thank you, sir."

But he didn't leave. He just stood there, watching me.

"Sir?"

"Don't mind me," replied Hicks, "I just want to see how this stress vocalizing works. My tensionologist told me to arrange pebbles as a hobby--or count blue cars."

So I vocalized my stress there in the corridor for five minutes, reciting every Shakespearean insult I could think of while my boss watched me. I felt a complete twit but rather than the quacks, I suppose.

"Jolly good," he said finally and walked off.

After checking I was alone in the corridor I spoke out loud: "Snell!"

Silence.

"Mr. Snell, can you hear me?"

More silence.

I sat down on a convenient bench and put my head between my knees. I felt sick and hot; both the SpecOps resident tensionologist and stresspert had said I might have some sort of traumatic aftershock from tackling Acheron Hades, but I hadn't expected anything so vivid as voices in my head. I waited until my head cleared and then made my way not towards Flakk and her competition winners but towards Bowden and the Litera Tec's office.<sup>8</sup>

I stopped.

"Prepared for what? I haven't done anything!"<sup>9</sup>

"No, no!" I exclaimed. "I *really* don't know what I've done. *Where are you!?!"*<sup>10</sup>

"Wait! Shouldn't I see you *before* the hearing?"

There was no answer. I was about to yell again, but several people came out of the elevator, so I kept quiet. I waited for a moment but Mr. Snell didn't seem to have anything more to add, so I made my way into the Litera Tec office, which closely resembled a large library in a country home somewhere. There weren't many books we *didn't* have--the result of bootleg seizures of literary works collected over the years. My partner, Bowden Cable, was already at his desk, which was as fastidiously neat as ever. He was dressed conservatively and was a few years younger than me although he had been in SpecOps a lot longer. Officially he was a higher rank, but we never let it get in the way--we worked as equals but in different ways: Bowden's quiet and studious approach contrasted strongly with my own directness. It seemed to work well.

"Morning, Bowden."

"Hello Thursday. Saw you on the telly last night."

I took off my coat, sat down and started to rummage through telephone messages.

"How did I look?"

"Fine. They didn't let you talk about *Jane Eyre* much, did they?"

"Press freedom was on holiday that day."

He understood and smiled softly.

"Never fear--someday the full story will be told. Are you okay? You look a little flushed."

"I'm okay," I told him, giving up on the telephone messages. "Actually, I'm not. I've been hearing voices."

"Stress, Thursday. It's not unusual. Anyone specific?"

I got up to fetch some coffee, and Bowden followed me.

"A lawyer named Akrid Snell. Said he was representing me. Refill?"

"No, thanks. On what charge?"

"He wouldn't say."

I poured myself a large coffee as Bowden thought for a moment.

"Sounds like an inner guilt conflict, Thursday. In policing we have to sometimes--"

He stopped as two other LiteraTec agents walked close by, discussing the merits of a recently discovered seventy-eight-word palindrome *that made sense*. We waited until they were out of earshot before continuing:

"--we have to sometimes close off our emotions. Could you have killed Hades if you were thinking clearly?"

"I don't think I would have been able to kill him if I *wasn't*," I replied, sniffing at the milk. "I've not lost a single night's sleep over Hades, but poor Bertha Rochester bothers me a bit."

We went and sat down at our desks.

"Maybe that's it," replied Bowden, idly filling in the *Owl* crossword. "Perhaps you secretly *want* to be held accountable for her death. I heard Crometty talking to me for weeks after his murder--I thought I should have been there to back him up-- but I wasn't."

"How are you getting along with the crossword?"

He passed it over and I scanned the answers.

"What's a 'RILK'?" I asked him.

"It's a--"

"Ah, there you are!" said a booming voice. We turned to see Victor Analogy striding across from his office. Head of the Swindon Litera Tecs since who knows when, he was a sprightly seventy-something with a receding hairline and a figure that *guaranteed* the part of Santa Claus at the SpecOps Christmas party. Despite his jocular nature he could be as hard as nails on occasion and was a good buffer between SO-27 and Braxton Hicks, who was strictly a company man. Analogy guarded our independence closely and regarded all his staff as family, and we thought the world of him. We all said our good mornings and Victor sat on my desk.

"How's the PR stuff going, Thursday?"

"More tedious than Spenser, sir."

"That bad, eh? Saw you on the telly last night. Rigged, was it?"

"Just a little."

"I hate to be a bore, but it's all important stuff. Have a look at this fax."

He handed me a sheet of paper, and Bowden read over my shoulder.

"Ludicrous," I said, handing the fax back. "What possible benefit could the Toast Marketing Board get from sponsoring us?"

Victor shrugged.

"Not a clue. But if they have cash to give away we could certainly do with some of it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Braxton's speaking to them this afternoon. He's very big on the idea."

"I bet he is."

Braxton Hicks's life revolved around his precious SpecOps budget. If any of us even *thought* of doing any sort of overtime, you could bet that Braxton would have something to say about it--and something in his case meant "no." Rumor had it that he had spoken to the canteen about giving out smaller helpings for dinner. He had been known as "Small Portions" in the office ever since--but never to his face.

"Did you find out who's been forging and trying to sell the missing ending to Byron's *Don Juan*?" asked Victor.

Bowden showed him a black-and-white photo of a dashing figure climbing into a parked car somewhere near the airship field. He was extravagantly dressed according to "the Byron Look"--it was quite popular, even amongst non-Byrons.

"Our prime suspect is a fellow named Byron2."

Victor looked at the picture carefully, first through his spectacles, then over the top of them.

"Byron number two, eh? How many Byrons are there now?"

"Byron2620 was registered last week," I told him. "We've been following Byron2 for a month, but he's smart. None of the forged scraps of *Heaven and Earth* can be traced back to him."

"Wiretap?"

"We tried, but the judge said that even though Byron2's surgery to *make* his foot clubbed in an attempt to emulate his hero was undeniably strange, and then getting his half sister pregnant was plainly disgusting, those acts only showed a fevered Byronic mind, and not *necessarily* one of intent to forge. We have to catch him inky-fingered, but at the moment he's off on a tour of the Mediterranean. We're going to attempt to get a search warrant while he's away."

"So you're not that busy, then?"

"What had you in mind?"

"Well," began Victor, "it seems there have been a couple more

attempts to forge *Cardenio*. I know it's small beer for you two but it helps Braxton with his damnable statistics. Would you go and have a look?"

"Sure," replied Bowden, knowing full well I would concur. "Got the addresses?"

He handed over a sheet of paper and bade us luck. We rose to leave, Bowden studying the list carefully.

"We'll go to Roseberry Street first," he muttered. "It's closer."

### 3.

## Cardenio Unbound

*Cardenio* was performed at court in 1613. It was entered in the stationer's register in 1653 as "by Mr. Fletcher and Shakespeare" and in 1728 Theobald Lewis published his play *Double Falsehood*, which he claimed to have written using an old prompt copy of *Cardenio*. Given the uneven Shakespearean value of his play and his refusal to produce the original manuscript, this claim seems doubtful. *Cardenio* was the name of the Ragged Knight in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* who falls in love with Lucinda, and it is assumed Shakespeare's play followed the same story. But we will never know. Not one single scrap of the play has survived.

MILLON DE FLOSS,  
"*Cardenio*": *Easy Come, Easy Go*

A FEW MINUTES LATER we were turning into a street of terraced houses close by the new thirty-thousand-seat croquet stadium. *Cardenio* scams were the three-card trick of the literary world; the bread and butter for literary lowlife. Since there were only five signatures, three pages of revisions to *Sir Thomas More* and a fragment of *King Lear*, anything that might conceivably have been near Shakespeare in his lifetime had big money attached to it. The rediscovery of *Cardenio* was the Holy Grail of the small-time antiquarians, the greatest lottery win there might ever be.

We rang on the doorbell of number 216. After a few moments a large middle-aged woman of ruddy complexion opened the door. Her hair looked newly coiffured and she was dressed in a lurid Prospero-patterned dress that might have been *her* Sunday best, but not anyone else's.

"Mrs. Hathaway<sup>34</sup>?"

"Yes?"

We held up our badges.

"Cable and Next, Swindon Literary Detectives. You called the office this morning?"

Mrs. Hathaway<sup>34</sup> beamed and ushered us in enthusiastically. As we stepped in we noticed that on every available wall space were hung pictures of Shakespeare, framed playbills, engravings and commemorative plates. The bookshelves were packed with numerous Shakespeare studies and volumes, the coffee table was carefully arrayed with rare back issues of the Shakespeare Federation's weekly magazine, *We Love Willy*, and in the corner of the room was a beautifully restored Will-Speak machine from the thirties. It was clear she was a serious fan. Not quite rabid enough to speak only in lines

from the plays, but close enough.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" asked Hathaway<sup>34</sup>, proudly putting on an ancient 78 of Sir Henry Irving playing *Hamlet* that was so bad it sounded as if he had recited it with a sock in his mouth.

"No, thank you, ma'am. You said you had a copy of *Cardenio*?"

"Of course!" she enthused, then added with a wink: "Will's lost play popping up like a jack-in-a-box must come as quite a surprise to you, I imagine?"

I didn't tell her that a *Cardenio* scam was almost a weekly event.

"We spend our days surprised, Mrs. Hathaway<sup>34</sup>."

"Call me Anne<sup>34</sup>!" she said as she opened a desk and gently withdrew a book wrapped in pink tissue paper. She placed it in front of us with great reverence.

"I bought it in a garage sale last week," she confided. "I don't think the owner knew that he had a copy of a long-lost Shakespeare play in amongst unread Daphne Farquitt novels and back issues of *Vintage Toaster Monthly*."

She leaned forward.

"I bought it for a song, you know."

And she giggled.

"I think this is the most important find since the *King Lear* fragment," she went on happily, clasping her hands to her bosom and staring adoringly at the engraving of the Bard above the mantelpiece. "That fragment was in Will's hand and covers only two lines of dialogue between Lear and Cordelia. It sold at auction for one point eight million! Just think how much *Cardenio* would be worth!"

"A genuine *Cardenio* would be almost priceless, ma'am," said Bowden politely, emphasizing the "genuine."

I closed the cover. I had read enough.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Mrs. Hathaway<sup>34</sup>--"

"Anne<sup>34</sup>. Call me Anne<sup>34</sup>."

"--Anne<sup>34</sup>. I'm afraid to say I believe this to be a forgery."

She didn't seem very put out.

"Are you sure, my dear? You didn't read very much of it."

"I'm afraid so. The rhyme, meter and grammar don't really match any of Shakespeare's known works."

There was silence for a moment as Hathaway<sup>34</sup> digested my words, frowned to herself and bit her lip. I could almost see common sense and denial fighting away at each other within her. In the end, denial won, as it so often does, and she retorted belligerently:

"Will was adaptable to the nth degree, Miss Next--I hardly think that any *slight* deviation from the norm is of any great relevance!"

"You misunderstand me," I replied, trying to be as tactful as possible. "It's not even a *good* forgery."



"Well!" said Anne, putting on an air of aggrieved indignation and switching off Henry Irving as though to somehow punish us. "Such authentication is notoriously difficult. I may have to seek a second opinion!"

"You are more than welcome to do that, ma'am," I replied slowly, "but they will say the same as I. It's not just the text. You see, Shakespeare never wrote on lined paper with a ballpoint, and even if he did, I doubt he would have had Cardenio seeking Lucinda in the Sierra Morena mountains driving an open-top Range Rover whilst playing 'It's the Same Old Song' by the Four Tops."

"Goodness!" said Bowden, amazed by the effrontery of the forger. "Is that what it says?"

I passed him the manuscript to have a look at, and he chuckled to himself. But Hathaway<sup>34</sup> was having none of it.

"And what of that?" returned Hathaway<sup>34</sup> angrily. "In *Julius Caesar* there are plenty of clocks striking the hour, yet they weren't invented until much later. I think Shakespeare introduced the Range Rover in much the same way; a literary anachronism, that's all!"

I smiled agreeably and backed towards the door.

"We'd like you to come in and file a report. Let you look at some mug shots; see if we can find out who pulled this."

"Nonsense!" said the woman loftily. "I will seek a second opinion, and if necessary, a third and a fourth--or as many as it takes. Good day, officers!"

And she opened the door, shooed us out and slammed it behind us.

"One born every minute," muttered Bowden as we walked to the car.

"I'd say. Well--that's *interesting*."

"What?"

"Don't look now, but up the road there is a black Pontiac. It was parked outside the SpecOps building when we left."

Bowden had a quick glance in their direction as we got into the car.

"What do you think?" I asked when we were inside.

"Goliath?"

"Could be. They're probably still pissed off about losing Jack Schitt into 'The Raven.' "

"I refuse to lose any sleep over him," replied Bowden, pulling into the main road.

"Me too."

I looked in the vanity mirror at the black automobile four vehicles behind.

"Still with us?" asked Bowden.

"Yup. Let's find out what they want. Take a left here, then left again and drop me off. Carry on for a hundred yards and then pull up."

Bowden turned off the main road and into another narrow

residential road, dropped me off as instructed, sped on past the next corner and stopped, blocking the street. I ducked behind a parked car, and sure enough, the large black Pontiac swept past me. It drove round the next corner and stopped abruptly when it saw Bowden and started to reverse. I tapped on the smoked glass window and waved my badge. The driver stopped and wound down the window.

"Thursday Next, SO-27. Why are you following us?" I demanded.

The driver and passenger were both dressed in dark suits and were clean-shaven. Only Goliath looked like this. Goliath-- or SpecOps. The driver looked blankly at me for a moment and then launched into a well-practiced excuse.

"We seem to have taken a wrong turning, miss. Can you tell us the way to Pete and Dave's Dodo Emporium?"

I was unimpressed by their drab cover story, but I smiled anyway. They were SpecOps as much as I was.

"Why don't you just tell me who you are? We'll all get along a lot better, believe me."

The two men looked at one another, sighed resignedly and then held up their badges for me to see. They were SO-5, the same search & containment that hunted down Hades.

"SO-5?" I queried. "Tamworth's old outfit?"

"I'm Phodder," said the driver. "My associate here is Kannon. SpecOps-5 has been reassigned."

"Reassigned? Does that mean Acheron Hades is officially dead?"

"No SO-5 case is ever *completely* closed. Acheron was only the *third* most evil criminal mind on the planet, Miss Next."

"Then who--or *what*--are you after this time?"

It seemed that they preferred asking questions to answering them.

"Your name came up in preliminary inquiries. Tell me, has anything odd happened to you recently?"

"What do you mean, odd?"

"Unusual. Deviating from the customary. Something outside the usual parameters of normalcy. An occurrence of unprecedented *weird*."

I thought for a moment.

"No."

"Well," announced Phodder with an air of finality, "if it does, would you call me at this number?"

I took the card, bade them goodbye and returned to Bowden.

We were soon heading north on the Cirencester road, the Pontiac nowhere in sight. I explained who they were to Bowden, who raised his eyebrows and said:

"Sounds ominous. Someone worse than Hades? That'll take some doing."

"Hard to believe, isn't it? Where are we heading now?"

"Vole Towers."

"Really?" I replied in some surprise. "Why would someone as eminent and respectable as Lord Volescamper get embroiled in a *Cardenio* scam?"

"Search me. He's a golfing buddy of Braxton's, so this could be political. Better not dismiss it out of hand and make him look an idiot--we'll only be clobbered by the chief."

We swung in through the battered and rusty gates of Vole Towers and motored up the long drive, which was more weed than gravel. We pulled up outside the imposing Gothic Revival house that was clearly in need of repair, and Lord Volescamper came out to meet us. Volescamper was a tall thin man with gray hair and a ponderous air. He was wearing an old pair of herringbone tweeds and brandished a pair of secateurs like a cavalry saber.

"Blasted brambles!" he muttered as he shook our hands. "Look here, they can grow two inches a day, you know; inexorable little blighters that threaten to engulf all that we know and love--a bit like anarchists, really. You're that Next girl, aren't you? I think we met at my niece Gloria's wedding--who did she marry again?"

"My cousin Wilbur."

"Now I remember. Who was that sad old fart who made a nuisance of himself on the dance floor?"

"I think that was you, sir."

Lord Volescamper thought for a moment and stared at his feet.

"Goodness. It was, wasn't it? Saw you on the telly last night. Look here, it was a rum business about that Bronte book, eh?"

"Very rum," I assured him. "This is Bowden Cable, my partner."

"How do you do, Mr. Cable? Bought one of the new Griffin Sportinas, I see. How do you find it?"

"Usually where I left it, sir."

"Indeed? You must come inside. Victor sent you, yes?"

We followed Volescamper as he shambled into the decrepit mansion. We passed into the main hall, which was heavily decorated with the heads of various antelope, stuffed and placed on wooden shields.

"In years gone by the family were prodigious hunters," explained Volescamper. "But look here, I don't carry on that way myself. Father was heavily into killing and stuffing things. When he died he insisted on being stuffed himself. That's him over there."

We stopped on the landing and Bowden and I looked at the deceased earl with interest. With his favorite gun in the crook of his arm and his faithful dog at his feet, he stared blankly out of the glass case. I thought perhaps his head and shoulders should also be mounted on a wooden shield but I didn't think it would be polite to

say so. Instead I said:

"He looks very young."

"But look here, he was. Forty-three and eight days. Trampled to death by antelope."

"In Africa?"

"No," sighed Volescamper wistfully, "on the A30 near Chard one night in '34. He stopped the car because there was a stag with the most magnificent antlers lying in the road. Father got out to have a peek and, well look here, he didn't stand a chance. The herd came from nowhere."

"I'm sorry."

"Sort of ironic, really," he rambled on as Bowden looked at his watch, "but do you know the *really* odd thing was, when the herd of antelope ran off, the magnificent stag had *also* gone."

"It must have just been stunned," suggested Bowden.

"Yes, yes, I suppose so," replied Volescamper absently, "I suppose so. But look here, you don't want to know about Father. Come on!"

And so saying he strutted off down the corridor that led to the library. We had to trot to catch up with him and soon arrived at a pair of steel vault doors--clearly, Volescamper had no doubts as to the value of his collection. I touched the blued steel of the doors thoughtfully.

"Oh, yes," said Volescamper, divining my thoughts, "look here, the old library is worth quite a few pennies--I like to take precautions; don't be fooled by the oak paneling inside--the library is essentially a vast steel safe."

It wasn't unusual. The Bodleian these days was like Fort Knox--and Fort Knox itself had been converted to take the Library of Congress's more valuable works. We entered, and if I was prepared to see an immaculate collection, I was to be disappointed--the library looked more like a box room than a depository of knowledge; the books were piled up on tables, in boxes, arranged haphazardly and in many cases just stacked on the floor ten or twelve high. *But what books!* I picked up a volume at random which turned out to be a second-impression copy of *Gulliver's Travels*. I showed it to Bowden, who responded by holding up a signed first edition of *Decline and Fall*.

"You didn't just buy *Cardenio* recently or something, then?" I asked, suddenly feeling that perhaps my early dismissal of the find might have been too hasty.

"Goodness me, no. Look here, we found it only the other day when we were cataloguing part of my great-grandfather Bartholomew Volescamper's private library. Didn't even know I had it. Ah!--this is Mr. Swaike, my security consultant."

A thickset man with a humorless look and jowls like bananas had

entered the library. He eyed us suspiciously as Volescamper made the introductions, then laid a sheaf of roughly cut pages bound into a leather book on the table.

"What sort of security matters do you consult on, Mr. Swaike?" asked Bowden.

"Personal and insurance, Mr. Cable," replied Swaike in a drab monotone. "This library is uncatalogued and uninsured; criminal gangs would regard it as a valuable target, despite the security arrangements. *Cardenio* is only one of a dozen books I am currently keeping in a secure safe *within* the locked library."

"I can't fault you there, Mr. Swaike," replied Bowden.

I looked at the manuscript. At first glance, things looked good, so I quickly donned a pair of cotton gloves, something I hadn't even considered with Mrs. Hathaway<sup>34</sup>'s *Cardenio*. I pulled up a chair and studied the first page. The handwriting was very similar to Shakespeare's with loops at the top of the L's and W's and spirited backward-facing extensions to the top of the D's; and the spelling was erratic, too--always a good sign. It all *looked* real, but I had seen some good copies in my time. There were a lot of scholars who were versed well enough in Shakespeare, Elizabethan history, grammar and spelling to *attempt* a forgery but none of them ever had the wit and charm of the Bard himself. Victor used to say that Shakespeare forgery was inherently impossible because the act of copying overrode the act of inspired creation--the heart being squeezed out by the mind, so to speak. But as I turned the first page and read the *dramatis personae*, butterflies stirred within me. I'd read fifty or sixty *Cardenios* before, but--I turned the page and read Cardenio's opening soliloquy:

"Know'st thou, O love, the pangs which I sustain--"

"It's a sort of Spanish thirty-something *Romeo and Juliet* but with a few laughs and a happy ending," explained Volescamper helpfully. "Look here, would you care for some tea?"

"What? Yes--thank you."

Volescamper told us that he would lock us in for security reasons but we could press the bell if we needed anything.

The steel door clanged shut and we read with increased interest as the knight Cardenio told the audience of his lost love Lucinda and how he had fled to the mountains after her marriage to the deceitful Ferdinand and become a ragged, destitute wretch.

"Good Lord," murmured Bowden over my shoulder, a sentiment that I agreed with wholeheartedly. The play, forgery or not, was *excellent*. After the opening soliloquy we soon went into a flashback where Cardenio and Lucinda write a series of passionate love letters in an Elizabethan version of a Rock Hudson/Doris Day split screen, Lucinda on one side reacting to Cardenio writing them on the other and then

vice versa. It was funny, too. We read on and learned of Cardenio's plans to marry Lucinda, then the Duke's demand for him to be a companion to his son Ferdinand, Ferdinand's hopeless infatuation for Dorothea, the trip to Lucinda's town, how Ferdinand's love transfers to Lucinda--

"What do you think?" I asked Bowden as we reached the end of the second act.

"Amazing! I've not seen anything like this, *ever*."

"Real?"

"I think so--but mistakes have been made before. I'll copy out the passage where Cardenio finds he has been duped and Ferdinand is planning to wed Lucinda. We can run it through the Verse Meter Analyzer back at the office."

We eagerly read on. The sentences, the meter, the style--it was all pure Shakespeare. *Cardenio* had been missing for over four hundred years, but for it to surface now and quite out of the blue gave me mixed feelings. Yes, it would throw the literary world off kilter and send every single Shakespeare fan and scholar into paroxysms of litjoy, but on the other hand it worried me, too. My father always used to say that whenever something is too fantastic to be true, it generally is. I voiced my concerns to Bowden, who pointed out less pessimistically that the original manuscript of Marlowe's *Edward II* surfaced only in the thirties. So unearthing new plays wasn't unprecedented-- but I still felt uneasy.

The tea was apparently forgotten, and while Bowden copied out the five-page scene for the VMA I looked around the library, wondering just what other treasures might be hidden here. The large safe-within-a-safe stood at the side of the room and contained, Swaike had said, another dozen or so rare books. I tried the safe door but it was locked, so I made a few notes for Victor in case he thought we should apply for a Compulsory Literary Disclosure Order. I then ambled round the old library, looking at books that caught my eye. I was thumbing through a collection of first-edition Evelyn Waugh novels when a key turned in the heavy steel door. I hurriedly replaced the volume as Lord Volescamper popped his head in and announced in an excited manner that due to "prior engagements" we would have to resume our work the following day. Swaike walked in to lock *Cardenio* back in the safe, and we followed Volescamper out through the shabby building to the entrance, just as a pair of large Bentley limousines rolled up. Volescamper bade us a hasty goodbye before striding forward to greet the passenger in the first car.

"Well well," said Bowden. "Look who it is."

A young man flanked by two large bodyguards got out and shook hands with the enthusiastic Volescamper. I recognized him from his

numerous TV appearances. It was Yorrick Kaine, the charismatic young leader of the marginal Whig party. He and Volescamper walked up the steps talking animatedly and then vanished inside Vole Towers.

We drove away from the moldering house with mixed feelings about the treasure we had been studying.

"What do you think?"

"Fishy," said Bowden. "Very fishy. How could something like *Cardenio* turn up out of the blue?"

"How fishy on the fishiness scale?" I asked him. "Ten is a stickleback and one is a whale shark."

"A whale isn't a fish, Thursday."

"A whale shark is--sort of."

"All right, it's as fishy as a crayfish."

"A crayfish isn't a fish," I told him.

"A starfish, then."

"*Still* not a fish."

"A silverfish?"

"Try again."

"This is a very odd conversation, Thursday."

"I'm pulling your leg, Bowden."

"Oh I see," he replied as the penny dropped. "Tomfoolery."

Bowden's lack of humor wasn't necessarily a bad thing. After all, none of us *really* had much of a sense of humor in SpecOps. But he thought it socially desirable to have one, so I did what I could to help. The trouble was, he could read *Three Men in a Boat* without a single smirk and viewed P. G. Wodehouse as "infantile," so I had a suspicion the affliction was long-lasting and permanent.

"My tensionologist suggested I should try stand-up comedy," said Bowden, watching me closely for my reaction.

"Well, 'How do you find the Sportina? / Where I left it' was a good start," I told him.

He stared at me blankly. It hadn't been a joke.

"I've booked myself in at the *Happy Squid* talent night on Monday. Do you want to hear my routine?"

"I'm all ears."

He cleared his throat.

"There are these three anteaters, see, and they go into a--"

There was a sharp crack, the car swerved, and we heard a fast flapping noise. I tensed as we fishtailed for a moment before Bowden brought the car under control.

"Damn!" he muttered. "Blowout."

There was another concussion like the first, but we weren't going so fast by now and Bowden eased the car in towards the car park at the

South Cerney stop of the Skyrail.

"Two blowouts?" muttered Bowden as we got out. We looked at the remnants of the car tire still on the rim, then at each other--and then at the busy road to see if anyone else was having problems. They weren't. The traffic zoomed up and down the road quite happily.

"How is it possible for *both* tires to go within ten seconds of each other?"

I shrugged. I didn't have an answer for this. It was a new car, after all, and I'd been driving all my life and never had a single blowout, much less two. With only one spare wheel we were stuck here for a while. I suggested he call SpecOps and get them to send a tow truck.

"Wireless seems to be dead," he announced, keying the mike and turning the knob. "That's odd."

Something, I felt, wasn't quite right.

"No more odd than a double blowout," I told him, walking a few paces to a handy phone booth. I lifted the receiver and said: "Do you have any change--"

I stopped because I'd just noticed a ticket on top of the phone. As I picked it up a Skyrail shuttle approached high up on the steel tracks, as if on cue.

"What have you found?" asked Bowden.

"A Skyrail day pass," I replied slowly, replacing the receiver. Broken images of something half forgotten or not yet remembered started to form in my head. It was confusing, but I knew what I had to do. "I'm going to take the Skyrail and see what happens."

"Why?"

"There's a neanderthal in trouble."

"How do you know?"

I frowned, trying to make sense of what I was feeling.

"I'm not sure. What's the opposite of *deja vu*, when you see something that hasn't happened yet?"

"I don't know--*avant verrais*?"

"That's it. Something's going to happen--and I'm part of it."

"I'll come with you."

"No, Bowden; if you were meant to come I would have found *two* tickets."

I left my partner looking confused and walked briskly up to the station, showed my ticket to the inspector and climbed the steel steps to the platform fifty feet above ground. I was alone apart from a young woman sitting by herself on a bench, checking her makeup in a mirror. She looked up at me for a moment before the doors of the shuttle hissed open and I stepped inside, wondering what events were about to unfold.



## 4.

### Five Coincidences, Seven Irma Cohens and One Confused Neanderthal

*The neanderthal experiment* was conceived in order to create the euphemistically entitled "medical test vessels," living creatures that were as close as possible to humans without actually *being* human within the context of the law. Using cells reengineered from DNA discovered in a *Homo Llysternef* forearm preserved in a peat bog near Llysternef in Wales, the experiment was an unparalleled success. Sadly for Goliath, even the hardiest of medical technicians balked at experiments conducted upon intelligent and speaking entities, so the first batch of neanderthals were trained instead as "expendable combat units," a project that was shelved as soon as the lack of aggressive instincts in the neanderthal was noted. They were subsequently released into the community as cheap labor and became a celebrated tax write-off. Infertile males and an expected life span of fifty years meant they would soon be relegated to the reengineeringment industries' ever-growing list of "failures."

GERHARD VON SQUID,  
*Neanderthals: Back After a Short Absence*

COINCIDENCES ARE strange things. I like the one about Sir Edmund Godfrey, who was found murdered in 1678 and left in a ditch on Greenberry Hill in London. Three men were arrested and hanged for the crime--Mr. *Green*, Mr. *Berry* and Mr. *Hill*. My father told me that for the most part coincidences could be safely ignored: They were merely the chance discovery of one pertinent fact from a million or so possible daily interconnections. "Stop a stranger in the street," he would say, "and delve into each other's past. Pretty soon an *astounding-too-amazing-to-be-chance* coincidence will appear."

I suppose he's right, but that didn't explain how a twin puncture outside the station, a broken wireless which led *directly* to the discovery of a valid Skyrail ticket and the Skyrail itself approaching at that precise moment can all happen out of the blue. Some things happen for a reason, and I was inclined to think that this was one of those times.

I stepped into the single Skyrail car, which was the same as every other I had been in. It was clean, had about forty seats and room for standing if required. I took a seat at the front as the doors sighed shut and, accompanied by the hum of electric motors, we were soon gliding effortlessly above the Cerney lakes. Since I was here for a purpose, I looked around carefully to see what that might be. The Skyrail operator was neanderthal; he had his hand on the throttle and gazed absently at the view. His eyebrows twitched and he sniffed the air occasionally. The car was almost empty; seven people, all of them

women and no one familiar.

"Three down," exclaimed a squat woman who was staring at a folded-up newspaper, half to herself and half to the rest of us. "*Well decorated for prying, perhaps?* Ten letters."

No one answered as we sailed past Cricklade Station without stopping, much to the annoyance of a large, expensively dressed lady who huffed loudly and pointed at the operator with her umbrella.

"You there!" she boomed like a captain before the storm. "What are you doing? I wanted to get off at Cricklade, damn you!"

The operator seemed unperturbed at the insult and muttered an apology. This obviously wasn't good enough for the loud and objectionable woman, who jabbed the small neanderthal violently in the ribs with her umbrella. He didn't yell out in pain, he just flinched, pulled the driver's door closed behind him and locked it. I stood up and snatched the umbrella from the woman.

"What the--!" she said indignantly.

"Don't do that," I told her. "It's not nice."

"Poppyclock!" she guffawed loudly. "Why, he's only neanderthal!"

"*Meddlesome*," said one of the other passengers sitting near the back with an air of finality, staring at an advert for the Gravitube.

The objectionable lady and I stared at her, wondering who she was referring to. She looked at us both, flushed, and said:

"No, no. Ten letters, three down. *Well decorated for prying. Meddlesome*."

"Very good," muttered the lady with the crossword as she scribbled in the answer.

I handed the umbrella back to the well-heeled woman, who eyed me malevolently; we were barely two feet apart but she wasn't going to sit down first, and neither was I.

"Jab the neanderthal again and I'll arrest you for assault," I told her.

"I happen to know," announced the woman tartly, "that neanderthals are legally classed as *animals*. You cannot assault a neanderthal any more than you can a mouse!"

My temper began to rise--always a bad sign. I would probably end up doing something stupid.

"Perhaps," I replied, "but I *can* arrest you for cruelty, bruising the calm and anything else I can think of."

But the woman wasn't the least bit intimidated.

"My husband is a justice of the peace," she announced like a hidden trump. "I can make things *very* tricky for you. What is your name?"

"Next," I told her without hesitation. "Thursday Next. SO-27."

Her eyelids flickered slightly and she stopped rummaging in her bag for a pencil and paper.

"The *Jane Eyre* Thursday Next?" she asked, her mood changing

abruptly.

"I saw you on the telly," chirped the woman with the crossword. "You seem a bit obsessed with your dodo, I must say. Why couldn't you talk about *Jane Eyre*, Goliath, or ending the Crimean War?"

"Believe me, I tried."

The well-heeled woman decided that this was a good moment to withdraw, so she sat back in her seat two rows behind me and stared out of the window as the Skyrail swept on past Broad Blunsdon Station; the passengers variously sighed, made tut-tut noises and shrugged to one another.

"I am going to complain to the Skyrail management about *this*," said a heavysset woman with makeup like builder's plaster. She carried a disgruntled-looking Pekinese. "A good cure for insubordination is--"

Her speech came to an abrupt end as the neanderthal suddenly increased the speed of the car.

I knocked on the acrylic door and said: "What's going on, pal?"

The neanderthal had taken about as much umbrella jabbing as he could that day, or any day, come to that.

"We are going home now," he said simply, staring straight ahead.

"We?" echoed the woman with the umbrella. "No, we're not. I live at Cricklade--"

"He means *I*," I told her. "Neanderthals don't use the personal pronoun."

"Damn stupid!" she replied. I glared at her and she got the message and lapsed into sulky silence. I leaned closer to the driver.

"What's your name?"

"Kaylieu," he replied.

"Good. Now Kaylieu, I want you to tell me what the problem is."

He paused for a moment as the Swindon Airship stop came and went. I saw another shuttle that had been diverted to a siding and several Skyrail officials waving at us, so it was only a matter of time before the authorities knew what was going on.

"We want to be *real*."

"*Day's hurt?*" murmured the squat woman at the back, sucking the end of her pencil and staring at the crossword.

"What did you say?" I said.

"*Day's hurt?*" she repeated, oblivious to the situation. "Nine down; eight letters--I think it's an anagram."

"I have no idea," I replied before returning my attention to Kaylieu. "What do you mean, *real*?"

"We are *not* animals," announced the once extinct cousin of mankind. "We want to be a protected species--like dodo, mammoth--and *you*. We want to speak to head man at Goliath *and* someone from Toad News."

"I'll see what I can do."

I walked to the back of the shuttle and picked up the emergency phone.

"Hello?" I said to the operator. "This is Thursday Next, SO-27. We have a situation in shuttle number--ah--6174."

When I told the operator what was going on she took a sharp intake of breath and asked how many people were with me and whether anyone was hurt.

"Seven females, myself and the driver; we are all fine."

"Don't forget Pixie Frou-Frou," said the large woman with the overdone makeup.

"And one Pekinese."

The operator told me they were clearing all the tracks ahead, we would have to keep calm and she would call back. I tried to tell her that it wasn't a *bad* situation, but she had rung off.

I sat down close to the neanderthal again. Jaw fixed, he was staring intently ahead, knuckles white on the throttle lever. We approached the Wanborough junction, crossed the M4 and were diverted west. The passenger directly behind me, a shy-looking girl in her late teens and dressed in a De La Mare label sweatshirt, caught my eye; she looked frightened.

I smiled to try to put her at ease.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Irma," she replied in a small voice. "Irma Cohen."

"Poppycock!" said the umbrella woman. "*I'm* Irma Cohen!"

"So am I," said the woman with the Peke.

"And me!" exclaimed the thin woman at the back. It seemed after a short period of frenzied cries of "Ooh fancy that!" and "Well I never!" that *everyone* in the Skyrail except me and Kaylieu and Pixie Frou-Frou was called Irma Cohen. Some of them were even vaguely related. It was an unnerving coincidence--for today, the best yet.

"*Thursday*," announced the squat woman.

"Yes?"

But she wasn't talking to me; she was writing in the answer: *Day's hurt--Thursday--it was* an anagram.

The emergency phone rang.

"This is Diana Thuntress, trained negotiator for SpecOps-9," said a businesslike voice. "Who is this?"

"Di, it's me, Thursday."

There was a pause.

"Hello Thursday. Saw you on the telly last night. Trouble seems to follow you around, doesn't it? What's it like in there?"

I looked at the small and unconcerned crowd of commuters who were showing each other pictures of their children. Pixie Frou-Frou

had fallen asleep and the Irma Cohen with the crossword had announced the clue for six across: "*The parting bargain?*"

"They're fine. A little bored, but not hurt."

"What does the perp want?"

"He wants to talk to someone at Goliath about species self-ownership."

"Wait--he's *neanderthal*?"

"Yes."

"It's not possible! A neanderthal being violent?"

"There's no violence up here, Di--just desperation."

"*Shit*," muttered Thuntress. "What do I know about dealing with thals? We'll have to get one of the SpecOps neanderthals in."

"He also wants to see a reporter from Toad News."

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

"Di?"

"Yes?"

"What can I tell Kaylieu?"

"Tell him that--er--Toad News are supplying a car to take him to the Goliath Genetic Labs in the Preselli Mountains where Goliath's governor, chief geneticist and a team of lawyers will be waiting to agree to terms."

As lies go, it was a real corker.

"But is that right?" I asked.

"There is no 'right,' Thursday," snapped Diana, "not since he took control of the Skyrail. There are eight lives in there. It doesn't take the winner of *Name That Fruit!* to figure out what we have to do. Pacifist neanderthal or not, there is a chance he *could* harm the passengers."

"Don't be ridiculous! No neanderthal has ever harmed anyone. What is this," I added, outraged by the crude approach, "staff training day for the trigger-happy clots at SO-14?"

"It's not unusual for hostages to start to empathize with their captors, Thursday. Let us handle this."

"Di," I said in a clear voice, "listen to me: *No one is either threatened or in danger!*"

"Yet, Thursday. *Yet*. Listen, we're not going to take that risk. This is how it's going to be: We're going to divert you back up along the Cirencester line. We'll have SO-14 agents in position at Cricklade. As soon as he stops I'm afraid we will have no alternative but to take him out. I want you to make sure the passengers are all in the back of the car."

"Diana, that's crazy! You'd kill him because he took a few lamebrained commuters for a merry trip round the Swindon loop?"

"You don't kill neanderthals; they are *destroyed*. There's a big difference--and besides, the law is very strict on hijackers."

"He's nothing of the sort, Di. He's just a confused extinctee!"

"Sorry, Thursday--this is out of my hands."

I hung up the phone angrily as the shuttle was diverted back up towards Cirencester. We flew through Shaw Station, much to the surprise of the waiting commuters, and were soon heading north again. I returned to the driver.

"Kaylieu, you *must* stop at Purton."

He grunted in reply but showed little sign of being happy or sad--the subtleties of neanderthal facial expressions were mostly lost on us. He stared at me for a moment and then asked:

"You have childer?"

I hastily changed the subject. Being sequenced infertile was the neanderthals' biggest cause of complaint against their sapien masters. Within thirty years or so the last of the experimental neanderthals would die of old age. Unless Goliath sequenced some more, that would be it. Extinct again--it was unlikely even *we* would manage that.

"No, no, I don't," I replied hastily.

"Nor us," returned Kaylieu, "but you have a *choice*. We don't. We should *never* have been brought back. Not to this. Not to carry bags for sapien, no childer and umbrellas jab-jab."

He stared bleakly into the middle distance--perhaps to a better life thirty thousand years ago when he was free to hunt large herbivores from the relative safety of a drafty cave. Home for Kaylieu was extinction again--at least for him. He didn't want to hurt any of us and would never do so. He couldn't hurt himself either, so he would rely on SpecOps to do the job for him.

"Goodbye."

I jumped at the finality of the pronouncement but upon turning found that it was merely the crossword Mrs. Cohen filling in the last clue.

"*The parting bargain*," she muttered happily. "Good buy. *Goodbye*. Finished!"

I didn't like this; not at all. The three clues of the crossword had been "Meddlesome," "Thursday" and "Goodbye." *More* coincidences. Without the dual blowout and the fortuitous day ticket, I wouldn't be here at all. Everyone was called Cohen and now the crossword. But *goodbye*? If all went according to SpecOps, the only person worthy of *that* interjection would be Kaylieu. Still, I had other things to worry about as we passed Purton without stopping. I asked everyone to move to the back of the car and once done, joined Kaylieu at the front.

"Listen to me, Kaylieu. If you don't make any threatening movements they may not open fire."

"We thought of that," said the neanderthal as he pulled an imitation automatic from his tunic.

"They will fire," he said as Cricklade Station hove into view a half mile up the line. "We carved it from soap--*Dove* soap," he added. "We thought it ironic."

We approached Cricklade at full speed; I could see SpecOps- 14 vehicles parked on the road and black uniformed SWAT teams waiting on the platform. With a hundred yards to run, the power to the Skyrail abruptly cut out and the shuttle skidded, power off, towards the station. The door to the driver's compartment swung open and I squeezed in. I grabbed his soapy gun and threw it to the floor. Kaylieu wasn't going to die, at least not if I could help it. We rumbled into the station. The doors were opened by SO-14 operatives and all the Irma Cohens rapidly evacuated. I put my arm round Kaylieu. It was the first time I had done so to any neanderthal and I was surprised by how hard the muscles were--and how warm to the touch.

"Move away from the thal!" said a voice from a bullhorn.

"So you can shoot him?" I yelled back.

"He threatened the lives of commuters, Next. He is a danger to civilized society!"

"Civilized?" I shouted angrily. "Look at you!"

"Next!" said the voice. "Move aside. That is a *direct* order!"

"You *must* do as they say," said the neanderthal.

"Over my dead body."

As if in reply there was a gentle *POK* sound and a single bullet hole appeared in the windshield of the shuttle. Someone had decided he could take out Kaylieu anyway. My temper flared and I tried to yell out in anger but no sound came from my lips. My legs felt weak and I fell to the floor in a heap, the world turning gray about me. I couldn't even feel my legs. I heard someone yell: *Medic!* and the last thing I saw before the darkness overtook me was Kaylieu's broad face looking down at me. He had tears in his eyes and was mouthing the words *We're so sorry. So very, very, sorry.*

## 5.

# Vanishing Hitchhikers

Urban legends are older than congress gaiters but far more interesting. I'd heard most of them, from the dog in the microwave to ball lightning chasing a housewife in Preston, to the fried dodo leg found in a Smiley Fried Chicken, to the carnivorous *Diatryma* supposedly reengineered and now living in the New Forest. I'd read all about the alien spaceship that crash-landed near Lam-bourn in 1952, the story that Charles Dickens was a woman and that the president of the Goliath Corporation was actually a 142- year-old man kept alive in a bottle by medical science. Stories about SpecOps abound, the favorite at present relating to "something odd" dug up in the Quantock Hills. Yes, I'd heard them all. Never believed any of them. Then one day, I *was* one. . . .

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*A Life in SpecOps*

I OPENED ONE EYE, then the other. It was a warm summer's day on the Marlborough downs. A light zephyr brought with it the delicate scent of honeysuckle and wild thyme. The air was warm and small puffy clouds were tinged red from the setting sun. I was standing by the side of a road in open country. In one direction I could just see a lone cyclist moving towards where I stood and in the other the road wound away into the distance past fields in which sheep grazed peacefully. If this was life after death, then a lot of people had not much to worry about and the Church had delivered the goods after all.

"Psssst!" hissed a voice close at hand. I turned to see a figure crouched behind a large Goliath Corporation billboard advertising buy-two-get-one-free grand pianos.

"Dad--?"

He pulled me behind the billboard with him.

"Don't stand there like a tourist, Thursday!" he snapped crossly. "Anyone would think you *wanted* to be seen!"

"Hi, Dad!" I said fondly, giving him a hug.

"Hello, hello," he said absently, glancing up and down the road and consulting the chronograph on his wrist and muttering: "fundamental things apply as time goes by. . . ."

I regarded my father as a sort of time-traveling knight errant, but to the ChronoGuard he was nothing less than a criminal. He threw in his badge and went rogue seventeen years ago when his "historical and moral" differences brought him into conflict with the ChronoGuard High Chamber. The down-side of this was that he didn't really exist at all in any accepted terms of the definition; the ChronoGuard had interrupted his conception in 1917 by a well-timed knock on his



parents' front door. But despite all this Dad *was* still around and I and my brothers *had* been born. "Things," Dad used to say, "are a whole lot weirder than we *can* know."

He thought for a moment and made a few notes on the back of an envelope with a pencil stub.

"How are you, by the way?" he asked.

"I think I was just accidentally shot dead by a SpecOps marksman."

He burst out laughing but suddenly stopped when he saw I was serious.

"Goodness!" he said. "You *do* live an exciting life. But never fear. You can't die until you've lived, and you've barely started *that* at all. What's the news from home?"

"A ChronoGuard officer turned up at my wedding bash wanting to know where you were."

"Lavoisier?"

"Yes; do you know him?"

"I should think so," sighed my father. "We were partners for nearly seven centuries."

"He said you were very dangerous."

"No more dangerous than anyone else who dares speak the truth. How's your mother?"

"She's fine, although you might try and clear up that misunderstanding about Emma Hamilton."

"Emma and I--I mean *Lady Hamilton* and I--are simply 'good friends.' There's nothing to it, I swear."

"Tell *her* that."

"I try, but you know what a temper she has. I only have to mention I've been anywhere *near* the turn of the nineteenth century and she gets in a frightful strop."

I looked around.

"Where are we?"

"Summer of '72," he replied. "All well at work?"

"We found a thirty-third play by Shakespeare."

"Thirty-three?" echoed my father. "That's odd. When I took the entire works back to the actor Shakespeare to distribute there were only *eighteen*."

"Perhaps the actor Shakespeare started writing them himself?" I suggested.

"By thunder you could be right!" he exclaimed. "He looked a bright spark. Tell me, how many comedies are there now?"

"Fifteen."

"But I only gave him *three*. They must have been so popular he started writing new ones himself!"

"It would explain why all the comedies are pretty much the same," I

added. "Spells, identical twins, shipwrecks--"

"--usurped Dukes, men dressed as women," continued my father. "You could be right."

"Wait a moment--!" I began. But my father, sensing my disquiet over the many seemingly impossible paradoxes in his work in the timestream, silenced me with his hand.

"One day you'll understand and everything will be more different than you can, at present, possibly hope to imagine."

I must have looked blank, for he checked the road again, leaned against the back of the billboard and continued:

"Remember, Thursday, that scientific thought, indeed, *any* mode of thought whether it be religious or philosophical or anything else, is just like the fashions that we wear--only much longer-lived. It's a little like a boy band."

"Scientific thought a boy band? How do you figure *that*?"

"Well, every now and then a boy band comes along. We like it, buy the records, posters, parade them on TV, idolize them right up until--"

"--the next boy band?" I suggested.

"Precisely. Aristotle was a boy band. A very good one, but only number six or seven. He was the best boy band until Isaac Newton, but even Newton was transplanted by an even *newer* boy band. Same haircuts--but different moves."

"Einstein, right?"

"Right. Do you see what I'm saying?"

"That the way we think is nothing more than a passing fad?"

"Exactly. Hard to visualize a new way of thinking? Try this. Go thirty or forty boy bands *past* Einstein. Where we would regard Einstein as someone who *glimpsed* a truth, played one good chord in seven forgettable albums."

"Where is this going, Dad?"

"I'm nearly there. Imagine a boy band so good that you never needed another boy band ever again--*or even any more music*. Can you imagine that?"

"It's hard. But yes, okay."

He let this sink in for a moment.

"When we reach *that* boy band, my dear, *everything* we have ever puzzled about becomes crystal clear--and we will kick ourselves that we hadn't thought of it earlier!"

"We will?"

"Sure. And you know the best thing about it? It's so devilishly *simple*."

"I see," I replied, slightly dubiously. "And when is this amazing Boy Band discovered?"

Dad suddenly turned serious.

"That's why I'm here. Perhaps never--which would be frightfully awkward in the grand scheme of things, believe me. Did you see a cyclist on the road?"

"Yes?"

"Well," he said, consulting the large chronograph on his wrist, "in ten seconds that cyclist will be knocked over and killed."

"And--?" I asked, sensing that I was missing something.

He looked around furtively and lowered his voice.

"Well, it seems that right here and now is the key event whereby we can avert whatever it is that *destroys every single speck of life on this planet!*"

I looked into his earnest eyes.

"You're not kidding, are you?"

He shook his head.

"In December 1985, *your* 1985, for some unaccountable reason, all the planet's organic matter turns to . . . *this*."

He withdrew a plastic specimen bag from his pocket. It contained a thick pinkish opaque slime. I took the bag and shook it curiously as we heard a loud screech of tires and a sickly thud. A moment later a broken body and twisted bicycle landed close by.

"On the 12th December at 20:23, give or take a second or two, all organic material--every plant, insect, fish, bird, mammal and the three billion human inhabitants of this planet--will start turning to *that*. End of all of us. End of Life--and there won't be that boy band I was telling you about. The problem is--" he went on as a car door slammed and we heard feet running towards us--"that we don't know *why*. The ChronoGuard are not doing any upstreaming work at present."

"Why is that?"

"Labor dispute. They're on strike for shorter hours. Not actually *less* hours, you understand, just the hours that they do work they want to be--er--shorter."

"So while the upstreamers are on strike the world could end and everyone will die, including them? But that's crazy!"

"From an industrial action viewpoint," said my father, furrowing his brow and going silent for a moment, "I think it's a very good strategy indeed. I hope they can thrash out a new agreement in time."

"And we'll know if they don't because the world ends?" I remarked sarcastically.

"Oh, they'll come to some arrangement," explained my father, smiling. "The dispute regarding *undertime* rates lasted almost two decades--time's easy to waste when you've got lots of it."

"Okay," I sighed, unwilling to get too embroiled in SO-12 labor disputes, "what can we do about averting this crisis?"

"Global disasters are like ripples in a pond, Sweetpea. There is

*always* an epicenter--a place in time and space where it all begins, however innocuously."

I began to understand. I looked around at the summer's evening. The birds were twittering happily and barely a soul could be seen in any direction.

"This is the epicenter?"

"Exactly so. Doesn't look like much, does it? I've run trillions of timestream models and the outcome is the same--whatever happens here and now somehow relates to the averting of the crisis. And since the cyclist's death is the only event of any significance for hours in either direction, it *has* to be the key event. The cyclist *must* live to ensure the continued health of the planet!"

We stepped out from behind the billboard to confront the driver, a youngish man who was dressed in flares and black leather jacket. He was visibly panicking.

"Oh my God!" he said as he stared at the broken body at our feet. "Oh my God! Is he--?"

"At the moment, yes," replied my father in a matter-of-fact sort of way as he filled his pipe.

"I must call an ambulance!" stammered the man. "He could still be alive!"

"Anyway," continued my father, ignoring the motorist completely, "the cyclist obviously *does* something or *doesn't* do something, and that's the key to this whole stupid mess."

"I wasn't speeding, you know," said the motorist quickly. "The engine might have been revving, but it was stuck in second . . ."

"Hang on!" I said, slightly confused. "You've been beyond 1985, Dad--you told me so yourself!"

"I know that," replied my father grimly, "so we'd better get this *absolutely* right."

"There was a low sun," continued the driver as he thought hard, "and he swerved in front of me!"

"Male guilt avoidance syndrome," explained my father. "It's a recognized medical condition by 2054."

Dad held me by the arm and there was a series of rapid flashes and an intense burst of noise, and we were about a half mile and five minutes in the direction the cyclist had come. He rode past and waved cheerily.

We returned the wave and watched him pedal off.

"Don't you stop him?"

"Tried. Doesn't work. Stole his bike--he borrowed a friend's. Diversion signs he ignored and the pools win didn't stop him either. I've tried everything. Time is the glue of the cosmos, Thursday, and it has to be *eased* apart--try to force events and they end up whacking

you on the frontal lobes like a cabbage from six paces. I thought you might have better luck. Lavoisier will have locked on to me by now. The car is due in thirty-eight seconds. Hitch a ride and do your best."

"Wait!" I said. "What about me?"

"I'll take you out again after the cyclist is safe."

"Back to where?" I asked suddenly. I had *no* desire to return the moment I'd left. "The SpecOps marksman, Dad, remember? Can't you put me back, say, thirty minutes earlier?"

He smiled and gave me a wink.

"Give my love to your mother. Thanks for helping out. Well, *Time waits for no man*, as we--"

But he was gone, melted into the air about me. I paused for a moment and put out a thumb to hail the approaching Jaguar. The car slowed and stopped and the motorist, oblivious to the impending accident, smiled and asked me to hop aboard.

I said nothing, jumped in, and we roared off.

"Just picked the old girl up this morning," mused the driver, more to himself than me. "Three point eight liters with triple DCOE Webbers. Six cylinders of big cat--lovely!"

"Mind the cyclist," I said as we rounded the corner. The driver stamped on the brake and swerved past the man on the bike.

"Bloody cyclists!" he exclaimed. "A danger to themselves and everyone else. Where are you bound, little lady?"

"I'm, ah ... visiting my father," I explained, truthfully enough.

"Where does he live?"

"Everywhere," I replied--

"Wireless seems to be dead," Bowden announced, keying the mike and turning the knob. "That's odd."

"No more odd than a double blowout," I told him, walking a few paces to the handy phone booth and picking up the Skyrail ticket.

"What have you found?" asked Bowden.

"A Skyrail day pass," I replied slowly, the broken images in my head that much clearer. "I'm going to take the Skyrail-- there's a neanderthal in trouble."

"How do you know?"

"Call it *deja vu* this time. Something's going to happen--and I'm part of it."

I left my partner and walked briskly up to the station, showed my ticket to the inspector and climbed the steel steps to the platform. The doors of the shuttle hissed open and I stepped inside, this time knowing *exactly* what I had to do.

## 4a.

### Five Coincidences, Seven Irma Cohens and One Confused Thursday Next

*The neanderthal experiment* was simultaneously the high and low point of the genetic revolution. Successful in that a long-dead cousin of *Homo sapien* was brought back from extinction, yet a failure in that the scientists, so happy to gaze upon their experiments from their ever lofty ivory towers, had not seen so far as to consider the social implications that a new species of man might command in a world unvisited by their like for over thirty millennia. It was little surprise that so many neanderthals felt confused and unprepared for the pressures of modern life. It was *Homo sapien* at his least sapient.

GERHARD VON SQUID,

*Neanderthals: Back After a Short Absence*

COINCIDENCES ARE strange things. I like the one about the poker player named Fallon, shot dead for cheating in San Francisco in 1858. It was considered unlucky to split the dead man's \$600 winnings, so they gave the money to a passerby, hoping to win it back. The stranger converted the \$600 to \$2,200 and when the police arrived, was asked to hand over the original \$600, as it was to be given to the dead gambler's next of kin. After a brief investigation, the money was returned to the passerby, as he turned out to be Fallon's son, who hadn't seen his father for seven years.

My father told me that for the most part coincidences could be safely ignored. "It would be *much* more remarkable," he would say, "if there *weren't* any coincidences."

I stepped into the Skyrail car and pulled the emergency lever. The neanderthal operator looked at me curiously as I jammed a foot in the open door of his driver's cubicle. I hauled him out and thumped him on the jaw before handcuffing him. A few days in the cooler and he would be back to Mrs. Kaylieu. The group of women in the Skyrail sat silent and shocked as I searched him and found--nothing. I looked in the cab and his sandwich box but the carved-soap gun wasn't there either.

The well-heeled woman who had earlier been so keen to jab the driver with her umbrella was now full of self-righteous indignation:

"Disgraceful! Attacking a poor defenseless neanderthal in this manner! I shall speak to my husband about this!"

One of the other women had called SpecOps-21 and a third had given the neanderthal a handkerchief to dab his bleeding mouth. I uncuffed Kaylieu and apologized, then sat down and put my head in my hands, wondering what had gone wrong. All the women were called Irma Cohen, but none of them would ever know it; Dad said

this sort of thing happens all the time.

"You did *what?*" asked Victor, a few hours later at the Litera Tec office.

"I punched a neanderthal."

"Why?"

"I thought he had a gun on him."

"A neanderthal? With a gun? Don't be ridiculous!"

I was in Victor's office with the door closed--a rarity for him. I had been arrested, charged, processed--and delivered under guard to Victor, who vouched for me before I was released. I would have been indignant had I not been so confused. And I was sorry for Kaylieu, too--I had knocked out one of his teeth.

"If the gun *had* been there it would have been carved from soap," I continued. "He wanted SO-14 to kill him. But that's not the half of it. The intended victim was *me*. If I had journeyed on the Skyrail it would have been Thursday in the body bag, not Kaylieu. I was set up, Victor. Someone manipulated events to try and bump me off with a stray SpecOps bullet--maybe that was their idea of a joke. If it hadn't been for Dad taking me out I'd be playing a harp by now."

Victor had been staring out of the window, his back to me.

"And there were the crossword clues--!"

Victor turned and walked back to his desk, picked up the paper and read the answers outlined in green.

"Meddlesome, Thursday, Goodbye."

He shrugged.

"Coincidence. I could make any sentence I wanted from any other clues just as easily. Look here."

He scanned the answers for a moment.

"*Planet, Destroyed, Soonest*. What does that mean? The world's about to end?"

"Well--"

He dumped my arrest report in his out tray and sat down.

"Thursday," he said quietly, staring at me soberly, "I've been in law enforcement for most of my life and I will tell you right now there is no such offense as 'attempted murder by coincidence in an alternative future by person or persons unknown.'"

I sighed and rubbed my face with my hands. He was right, of course.

"O-kay," he sighed. "Take my advice, Thursday. Tell them you thought the neanderthal was a felon, that he reminded you of the bogeyman--*anything*. Mention any unauthorized ChronoGuard shenanigans and Flanker will have your badge as a paperweight. I'll write a good report to SO-1 about your work and conduct so far. With a bit of luck and some serious lying on your behalf, maybe you can get

away with a reprimand. For goodness sake, didn't you learn *anything* from that bad time junket on the M1?"

He got up and rubbed his legs. His body was failing him. The hip he'd had replaced four years ago needed to be replaced. Bowden joined us from where he had been running the copied pages of *Cardenio* through the Verse Meter Analyzer. Unusually for him he seemed to be showing some form of outward excitement. Bouncing, almost.

"How does it look?" I asked.

"Astounding!" replied Bowden as he waved a printed report. "94% probability of Will being the author--not even the best fake *Cardenio* managed higher than a 76. The VMA detected slight traces of collaboration, too."

"Did it say who?"

"73% likelihood of Fletcher--something that would seem to bear out against historical evidence. Forging Shakespeare is one thing, forging a collaborated work is *quite* another."

We all fell silent. Victor rubbed his forehead in contemplation and chose his words carefully.

"Okay, strange and impossible as it might seem, we may have to accept that this is the real thing. This could turn out to be the biggest literary event in history, *ever*. We keep this quiet and I'll get Professor Spoon to look it over. We will have to be 100% sure. I'm not going to suffer the same embarrassment we had over that *Tempest* fiasco."

"Since it isn't in the public domain," observed Bowden, "Volescamper will have the sole copyright for the next seventy-six years."

"Every playhouse on the planet will want to put it on," I added. "And think of the movie rights."

"Exactly," replied Victor. "He's sitting on not only the most fantastic literary discovery for three centuries but also a keg of purest gold. The question is, how did it languish in his library undiscovered all this time? Scholars have studied there since 1709. How on earth was it overlooked? Ideas, anyone?"

"Retrosnatch?" I suggested. "If a rogue ChronoGuard operative decided to go back to 1613 and steal a copy he could have a tidy little nest egg on his hands."

"SO-12 take retrosnatch very seriously and they assure me that it is *always* detected, sooner or later or both--and dealt with severely. But it's possible. Bowden, give SO-12 a call, will you?"

Bowden put out his hand to pick up the phone just as it started to ring.

"Hello? . . . It's not, you say? Okay, thanks."

He put the phone down.



"The ChronoGuard say not."

"How much do you think it's worth?" I asked.

"Hundred million," replied Victor. "Two hundred. Who knows. I'll call Volescamper and tell him to keep quiet about it. People would kill to even read it. No one else is to know about it, do you hear?"

We nodded our agreement.

"Good. Thursday, the network takes internal affairs very seriously. SO-1 will want to speak to you here tomorrow at four about the Skyrail thing. They asked me to suspend you, but I told them bollocks. Just take some leave until tomorrow. Good work, the two of you. Remember, *not a word to anyone!*"

We thanked him and he left. Bowden stared at the wall for a moment before saying: "The crossword clues bother me, though. If I wasn't of the opinion that coincidences are merely chance or an overused Dickensian plot device, I might conclude that an old enemy of yours wants to get even."

"One with a sense of humor, obviously," I murmured in agreement.

"That rules out Goliath, I suppose," mused Bowden. "Who are you calling?"

"SO-5."

I dug Agent Phodder's card out of my pocket and rang the number. He had told me to call him if "an occurrence of unprecedented *weird*" took place, so I was doing precisely that.

"Hello?" said a brusque voice after the telephone had rung for a long time.

"Thursday Next, SO-27," I announced. "I have some information for Agent Phodder."

There was a long pause.

"Agent Phodder has been reassigned."

"Agent Kannon, then."

"Both Phodder *and* Kannon have been reassigned," replied the man sharply. "Freak accident laying linoleum. The funeral's on Friday."

This was unexpected news. I couldn't think of anything intelligent to say, so I mumbled: "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Quite," said the brusque man, and put the phone down.

"What happened?" asked Bowden.

"Both dead," I said quietly.

"Hades?"

"Linoleum."

We sat in silence for a moment, unnerved by the news.

"Does Hades have the sort of powers that might be necessary to manipulate coincidences?" asked Bowden.

I shrugged.

"Perhaps," said Bowden thoughtfully, "it *was* a coincidence after all."

"Perhaps," I said, wishing I could believe it. "Oh--I almost forgot. The world's going to end on the 12th December at 20:23."

"Really?" replied Bowden in a disinterested tone. Apocalyptic pronouncements were nothing new to any of us. The world had been predicted as about to be destroyed almost every year since the dawn of man.

"Which one is it this time?" asked Bowden. "Plague of mice or the wrath of God?"

"I'm not sure. I've got to be somewhere at five. Do us a favor, would you?"

I reached into my pocket and retrieved the small evidence bag my father had given to me. Bowden took the bag from my outstretched arm and looked at it curiously.

I checked the time and rose to leave.

"What is it?" he asked, staring at the pink goo.

"That's what I need to know. Will you have the labs analyze it?"

We bade each other goodbye and I trotted out of the building, bumping into John Smith, who was maneuvering a wheelbarrow with a carrot the size of a vacuum cleaner in it. There was a big label attached to the oversized vegetable that read *evidence*, and I held the door open for him.

"Thanks," he panted.

I jumped in my car and pulled out of the car park. My appointment at five was at the doctor's, and I wasn't going to miss it for anything.

## 6. Family

Landen Parke-Laine had been with me in the Crimea in '72. He lost a leg to a land mine and his best friend to a military blunder. His best friend was my brother, Anton--and Landen testified against him at the hearing that followed the disastrous "charge of the light armored brigade." My brother was blamed for the debacle, Landen was honorably discharged, I was awarded the Crimea Star for gallantry, I didn't speak to him for ten years and now we're married. It's funny how things turn out.

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*Crimean Reminiscences*

**H**ONEY, I'M HOME!" I yelled out. There was a scrabbling noise from the kitchen as Pickwick's feet struggled to get a purchase on the tiles in his eagerness to greet me. I had engineered him myself when you could still buy home cloning kits over the counter. He was an early version 1.2, which explained his lack of wings--they didn't complete the sequence for two more years. He made excited *plock plock* noises and bobbed his head in greeting, rummaged in the wastebasket for a gift and eventually brought me a discarded junk mail flyer for *Lorna Doone* merchandising. I tickled him under the chin, and he ran to the kitchen, stopped, looked at me and bobbed his head some more.

"Hell-ooo!" yelled Landen from his study. "Do you like surprises?"

"When they're nice ones!" I yelled back.

Pickwick returned to my side, plock-plocked some more and tugged the leg of my jeans. He scuttled off into the kitchen again and waited for me at his basket. Intrigued, I followed. I could see the reason for his excitement. In the middle of the basket, amongst a large heap of shredded paper, was an egg.

"Pickwick!" I cried excitedly. "*You're a girl!*"

Pickwick bobbed some more and nuzzled me affectionately. After a while she stopped and delicately stepped into her basket, ruffled her feathers, tapped the egg with her beak and then walked round it several times before gently placing herself over it. A hand rested on my shoulder. I touched Landen's fingers and stood up. He kissed me on the neck and I wrapped my arms round his chest.

"I thought Pickwick was a boy?" he asked.

"So did I."

"Is it a sign?"

"Pickers laying an egg and turning out to be a girl?" I replied. "What do you mean--you're going to have a baby, Land?"

"No, silly, you *know* what I mean."

"I do?" I asked, looking up at him with carefully engineered innocence.

"Well?"

"Well what?" I stared into his bright concerned face with what I thought was a blank expression. But I couldn't hold it for long and was soon a bundle of girlish giggles and salty tears. He hugged me tightly and placed his hand gently on my tum.

"In there? A baby?"

"Yes. Small pink thing that makes a noise. Seven weeks. Probably appear July-ish."

"How are you feeling?"

"All right," I told him. "I felt a bit sick yesterday, but that might have had nothing to do with it. I'll work until I start waddling and then take leave. How are *you* feeling?"

"Odd," said Landen, hugging me again, "in a very nice kind of *elated* sort of way. . . . Who can I tell?"

"No one quite yet. Probably just as well--your mum would knit herself to death!"

"And what's wrong with my mother's knitting?" asked Landen, feigning indignation.

"Nothing," I giggled, "but there is a limit to storage space."

"At least the things she knits are recognizable," he replied. "That jumper your mum gave me for my birthday--what does she think I am, a squid?"

I buried my face in his collar and held him close. He rubbed my back gently and we stood together for several minutes without talking.

"Did you have a good day?" he asked at last.

"Well," I began, "we found *Cardenio*, I was shot dead by an SO-14 marksman, became a vanishing hitchhiker, saw Yorrick Kaine, suffered a few too many coincidences and knocked a neanderthal unconscious."

"No puncture this time?"

"Two, actually--at the same time."

"What was Kaine like?"

"Difficult to say. He arrived at Volscamper's as we were leaving. Aren't you even *curious* about the marksman?"

"Yorrick Kaine is giving a talk tonight about the economical realities of a Welsh free trade agreement--"

"Landen," I said, "it's my uncle's party tonight. I promised Mum we'd be there."

"Yeah, I know."

"All right," sighed Landen. "What was it like?"

"Don't ask."

"Are you going to ask me about the incident with SO-14 now?" My uncle Mycroft had announced his retirement. He was seventy-seven, and following the events of the Prose Portal and Polly's imprisonment in "I wandered lonely as a cloud," they had both decided that enough was enough. The Goliath Corporation had been offering Mycroft not one but *two* blank checks for him to resume work on a new Prose Portal, but Mycroft had steadfastly refused, maintaining that the Portal could not be replicated even if he had wanted to. We took my car up to Mum's house and parked a little way up the road.

"I never thought of Mycroft retiring," I said as we walked down the street.

"Me neither," he replied. "What do you suppose he'll do?"

"Watch *Name That Fruit!* most likely. He says that soaps and quiz shows are the ideal way to fade out."

"He's not far wrong," added Landen. "After a few years of *65 Walrus Street*, death might become something of a welcome distraction."

We heaved open the garden gate and greeted the dodos, who all had a bright pink ribbon tied round their necks for the occasion. I offered them a few marshmallows and they pecked and plocked greedily at the proffered gifts. The front door was opened by Wilbur, who was one of Mycroft's sons and had reached middle age well before his time. Landen thought he did it on purpose, as though he could somehow accelerate through the days of work and get to retirement and golf just that little bit sooner.

"Hello, Thursday!" he enthused, ushering us inside.

"Hi, Wilbers. All well?"

"I'm *very* well," replied Wilbur, smiling benignly. "Hello, Landen--I read your latest book. It was a big improvement on the last one, I must say."

"You're very kind," replied Landen dryly.

"Drink?"

He offered us both a glass, and I took mine eagerly. I had just got it to my lips when Landen took it out of my hands. I looked at him and he mouthed, "Baby." Blast. Hadn't thought of that.

"I was *promoted*, you know," continued Wilbur, walking through the hall and towards the living room.

He paused to allow us to murmur a congratulatory sound before continuing: "Consolidated Useful Stuff always promote those within the company that show particular promise, and after ten years in pension fund management ConStuff felt I was ready to branch into something new and dynamic. I'm now Services Director at a subsidiary of theirs named MycroTech Developments."

"But my goodness *what* a coincidence!" said Landen sarcastically.

"Isn't that Mycroft's company?"

"Coincidental," replied Wilbur forcefully, "as you say. Mr. Perkup--the CEO of Mycro Tech--told me it was solely due to my diligence; I--"

"Thursday, *darling!*" interrupted Gloria, Wilbur's wife. Formerly a Volescamper, she had married Wilbur under the accidental misapprehension that A: he would be coming into a fortune and B: he was as intelligent as his father. She had been wrong--in a spectacular fashion--on both counts.

"Darling, you are looking simply divine--have you lost weight?"

"I have no idea, Gloria, but . . . you're looking different."

And she was. Habitually dressed to the nines in expensive clothes, hats, makeup and lashings of what-have-you, tonight Gloria was dressed in chinos and a shirt. She hardly wore any makeup and her hair, usually perfectly coiffured, was tied up in a ponytail with a black scrunchie.

"What do you think?" she asked, doing a twirl for us both.

"What happened to the PS500 dresses?" asked Landen. "Bailiffs been in?"

"No, this is all the rage--and you should know, Thursday. *FeMole* is promoting the Thursday Next look. This is very much 'in' at present."

"Ridiculous," I told her, wondering if there was an end to the ludicrous media spin-offs from the whole *Eyre* thing. Cordelia had gone so far as to license jigsaw puzzles and action figures before I had a chance to stop her. I wondered if she'd had a hand in this, too.

"If Bonzo the Wonder Hound had rescued Jane Eyre," I asked, trying to keep a straight face, "would you all be wearing studded collars and smelling each other's bottoms?"

"There is no need to be offensive," replied Gloria haughtily as she looked me up and down. "You should be *honored*. Mind you, the December issue of *FeMole* thinks that a brown leather flier's jacket is more in keeping with 'the look.' Your black leather is a little bit passe, I'm afraid. And those shoes--hell's teeth!"

"Wait a moment!" I returned. "How can you tell me that I don't have the Thursday Next look? I *am* Thursday Next!"

"Fashions evolve, Thursday--I've heard that next month's fashions will be marine invertebrates. You should enjoy it while you can."

"Marine invertebrates?" echoed Landen. "What happened to that squidlike jumper of your mum's? We could be sitting on a fortune!"

"Can neither of you be serious?" asked Gloria disdainfully. "If you're not in you're out, and where would you be then?"

"Out, I guess," I replied. "Land, what do you think?"

"Totally out, Thurs."

We stared at her half smiling, and she laughed. Gloria was a good sort once you broke down the barriers. Wilbur, seizing the chance to

tell us more about his fascinating new job, carried on as soon as his wife stopped talking.

"I'm now on PS20K *plus* car and a good pension package. I could take voluntary retirement at fifty-five and still draw two-thirds of my wage. What is the SpecOps retirement fund like?"

"Crap, Wilbur--but you know that."

A slightly smaller and more follicularly challenged version of Wilbur walked up.

"Hello, Thursday."

"Hello, Orville. How's the ear?"

"Just the same. What was that you were saying about retiring at fifty-five, Will?"

In all the excitement of pension plans I was forgotten. Charlotte, who was Orville's wife, also had the Thursday Next look; she and Gloria fell eagerly into untaxing conversation about whether leather shoes in "the look" should be worn above or below the ankle and whether a small amount of eyeliner was acceptable. As usual, Charlotte tended to agree with Gloria; in fact, she tended to agree with everybody about everything. She was as hospitable as the day was long; just don't get caught in an elevator with her--she could agree you to death.

We left them to their conversation, and I walked into the living room, deftly catching the wrist of my elder brother Joffy, who had been hoping to give me a resounding slap on the back of my head as was his thirty-five-year-old custom. I twisted his arm into a half nelson and had his face pressed against the door before he knew what had happened.

"Hello, Joff," I said. "Slowing up in your old age?"

I let him go, he laughed energetically, straightened his jaw and dog collar and hugged me tightly while proffering a hand for Landen to shake. Landen, after checking for the almost mandatory hand buzzer, shook it heartily.

"How's Mr. and Mrs. Doofus, then?"

"We're fine, Joff. You?"

"Not that good, Thurs. The Church of the Global Standard Deity has undergone a split."

"No!" I said with as much surprise and concern in my voice as I could muster.

"I'm afraid so. The new Global Standard *Clockwise* Deity have broken away due to unresolvable differences over the direction in which the collection plate is passed round."

"*Another* split? That's the third this week!"

"Fourth," replied Joffy dourly, "and it's only Tuesday. The Standardized pro-Baptist conjoined Methodarian-Lutherian sisters of

something-or-other split into two subgroups yesterday. Soon," he added grimly, "there won't be enough ministers to man the splits. As it is I have to attend two dozen different breakaway church groups every week. I often forget which one I'm at, and as you can imagine, preaching to the Idolatry Friends of St. Zvlkx the Consumer the sermon that I should have been reading to the Church of the Misrepresented Promise of Eternal Life can be highly embarrassing. Mum's in the kitchen. Do you think Dad will turn up?"

I didn't know and told him so. He looked crestfallen for a moment and then said: "Will you come and do a professional mingle at my Les Artes Modernes de Swindon show next week?"

"Why me?"

"Because you're vaguely famous and you're my sister. Yes?"

"Okay."

He tugged my ear affectionately and we walked into the kitchen.

"Hello, Mum!"

My mother was bustling around some chicken vol-au-vent. By some bizarre twist of fate the pastry had turned out not at all burned and actually quite tasty--it had thrown her into a bit of a panic. Most of her cooking ended up as the culinary equivalent of the Tunguska event.

"Hello, Thursday, hello, Landen, can you pass me that bowl, please?"

Landen passed it over, trying to guess the contents.

"Hello, Mrs. Next," said Landen.

"Call me Wednesday, Landen--you're family now, you know." She smiled and giggled to herself.

"Dad said to say hello," I put in quickly before Mum cooed herself into a frenzy. "I saw him today."

My mother stopped her random method of cooking and recalled for a moment, I imagine, fond embraces with her eradicated husband. It must have been quite a shock, waking up one morning and finding your husband never existed. Then, quite out of the blue, she yelled: "DH-82, *down!*"

Her anger was directed at a small Tasmanian tiger that had been nosing the remains of some chicken on the table edge.

"Bad boy!" she added in a scolding tone. The Tastiger looked crestfallen, sat on its blanket by the Aga and stared down at its paws.

"Rescue Thylacine," explained my mother. "Used to be a lab animal. He smoked forty a day until his escape. It's costing me a fortune in nicotine patches. Isn't it, DH-82?"

The small reengineered native of Tasmania looked up and shook his head. Despite being vaguely dog-shaped, this species was more closely related to a kangaroo than a Labrador. You always expected one to



wag its tail, bark or fetch a stick, but they never did. The closest behavioral similarities were a propensity to steal food and an almost fanatical devotion to tail chasing.

"I miss your dad a lot, you know," said my mother wistfully. "How--"

There was a loud explosion, the lights flickered, and something shot past the kitchen window.

"What was that?" said my mother.

"I think," replied Landen soberly, "it was Aunt Polly."

We found her in the vegetable patch dressed in a deflating rubber suit that was meant to break her fall but obviously hadn't--she was holding a handkerchief to a bloodied nose.

"My goodness!" exclaimed my mother. "Are you okay?"

"Never been better!" she replied, looking at a stake in the ground and then yelling: "Seventy-five yards!"

"Righty-oh!" said a distant voice from the other end of the garden. We turned to see Uncle Mycroft, who was consulting a clipboard next to a smoking Volkswagen convertible.

"Car seat ejection devices in case of road accidents," explained Polly, "with a self-inflating rubber suit to cushion the fall. Pull on a toggle and *bang*--out you go. Prototype, of course."

"Of course."

We helped her to her feet and she trotted off, seemingly none the worse for her experience.

"Mycroft still inventing, then?" I said as we walked back inside to discover that DH-82 had eaten all the vol-au-vent, main course *and* the trifle for pudding.

"DH!" she said crossly to the guilty-looking and very bloated Tastiger. "That was *very* bad! What am I going to feed everybody on now?"

"How about thylacine cutlets?" suggested Landen.

I elbowed him in the ribs and Mum pretended not to hear.

Landen rolled up his sleeves and searched through the kitchen for something he could cook quickly and easily. It was going to be hard--all of the cupboards were full of tinned pears.

"Have you anything apart from canned fruit, Mrs.--I mean, Wednesday?"

Mum stopped trying to chastise DH-82, who, soporific through gluttony, had settled down for a long nap.

"No," she admitted. "The man in the shop said there would be a shortage, so I bought his entire stock."

I walked down to Mycroft's laboratory, knocked and, when there was no reply, entered. Usually, the lab presented an Aladdin's cave of inventive genius, the haphazard and eclectic mix of machines, papers,

blackboards and bubbling retorts a shrine to disarray; an antidote to order. But today it was different: All his machines had been dismantled and now lay about the room, tagged and carefully stacked. Mycroft himself, having obviously finished testing the ejection system, was now tweaking a small bronze object. He was startled when I spoke his name but relaxed as soon as he saw it was me.

"Hello, love!" he said kindly.

"Hello, Uncle. How have you been?"

"Good. I'm off on retirement in--*don't touch that!*--in one hour and nine minutes. You looked good on the telly last night."

"Thank you. What are you up to, Uncle?"

He handed me a large book.

"*Enhanced* indexing. In a Nextian dictionary, godliness *can* be next to cleanliness--or anything else for that matter."

I opened the book to look up "trout" and found it on the first page I opened.

"Saves time, eh?"

"Yes; but--"

Mycroft had moved on.

"Over here is a Lego filter for vacuum cleaners. Did you know that over a million pounds' worth of Lego is hoovered up every year, and a total of ten thousand man-hours are wasted sorting through the dust bags?"

"I didn't know that, no."

"This device will sort any sucked-up bits of Lego into colors or shapes, according to how you set this knob here."

"Very impressive."

"This is just hobby stuff. Come and look at some *real* innovation."

He beckoned me across to a blackboard, the surface covered with a jumbled mass of complicated algebraic functions.

"This is Polly's hobby, really. It's a new form of mathematical theory that makes Euclid's work seem like little more than long division. We have called it Nextian geometry. I won't bother you with the details, but watch this."

Mycroft rolled up his shirtsleeves and placed a large ball of dough on the workbench and rolled it out into a flat ovoid with a rolling pin.

"Scone dough," he explained. "I've left out the raisins for purposes of clarity. Using *conventional* geometry, a round scone cutter always leaves waste behind, agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Not with *Nextian* geometry! You see this pastry cutter? Circular, wouldn't you say?"

"Perfectly circular, yes."

"Well," carried on Mycroft in an excited voice, "it isn't. It *appears*

circular but actually it's a square. A *Nextian* square. Watch."

And so saying he deftly cut the dough into twelve perfectly circular shapes with no waste. I frowned and stared at the small pile of disks, not quite believing what I had just seen.

"How--?"

"Clever, isn't it?" he chuckled. "Admittedly it only works with Nextian dough, which doesn't rise so well and tastes like denture paste, but we're working on that."

"It *seems* impossible, Uncle."

"We didn't know the nature of lightning or rainbows for three and a half million years, pet. Don't reject it just because it *seems* impossible. If we closed our minds, there would never be the Gravitube, antimatter, Prose Portals, thermos flasks--"

"Wait!" I interrupted. "How does a *thermos* fit in with that little lot?"

"Because, my dear girl," replied Mycroft, cleaning the blackboard and drawing a crude picture of a thermos with a question mark, "no one has the least idea *why* they work." He stared at me for a moment and continued: "You will agree that a vacuum flask keeps hot things hot in the winter and cold things cold in the summer?"

"Yes--?"

"Well, *how does it know?* I've studied vacuum flasks for many years and *not one* of them gave any clues as to their inherent seasonal cognitive ability. It's a mystery to me, I can tell you."

"Okay, okay, Uncle--how about applications for Nextian geometry?"

"Hundreds. Packaging and space management will be revolutionized overnight. I can pack Ping-Pong balls in a cardboard box without any gaps, punch steel bottle tops with no waste, drill a square hole, tunnel to the moon, divide cake more efficiently and also--and this is the most exciting part--*collapse matter*."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"Not at all," replied Mycroft airily. "You accept that all matter is mostly empty space? The gaps between the nucleus and the electrons? Well, by applying Nextian geometry to the subatomic level I can collapse matter to a fraction of its former size. I will be able to reduce almost anything to the microscopic!"

He stopped for a moment and regathered his thoughts.

"Miniaturization is a technology that *needs* to be utilized," explained Mycroft. "Can you imagine tiny nanomachines barely bigger than a cell, building, say, food protein out of nothing more than garbage? Banoffee pie from landfills, ships from scrap iron--! It's a fantastic notion. Consolidated Useful Stuff are financing some R&D with me as we speak."

"At Mycro Tech Developments?"

"Yes," he said sharply. "How did you know?"

"Wilbur said he had got a job there--by coincidence, of course."

"Of course," affirmed Mycroft, who never supported, or admitted to, any sort of nepotism.

"On the subject of coincidences, Uncle, any thoughts on what they are and how they come about?"

Mycroft fell silent for a moment as his huge brain clicked over the facts as he understood them.

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "it is my considered opinion that most coincidences are simply quirks of chance--if you extrapolate the bell curve of probability you will find statistical abnormalities that seem unusual but are, in actual fact, quite likely, given the amount of people on the planet and the amount of different things we do in our lives."

"I see," I replied slowly. "That explains things on a minor coincidental level, but what about the *bigger* coincidences? How high would you rate seven people in a Skyrail shuttle all called Irma Cohen and the clues of a crossword reading out ' Meddlesome Thursday goodbye' just before someone tried to kill me?"

Mycroft raised an eyebrow.

"That's quite a coincidence. More than a coincidence, I think." He took a deep breath. "Thursday, think for a moment about the fact that the universe always moves from an ordered state to a disordered one; that a glass may fall to the ground and shatter yet you *never* see a broken glass reassemble itself and then jump back onto the table."

"I accept that."

"But why doesn't it?"

"Search me."

"Every atom of the glass that shattered would contravene no laws of physics if it were to rejoin--on a subatomic level all particle interactions are reversible. Down *there* we can't tell which event precedes which. It's only out *here* that we can see things age and define a strict direction in which time travels."

"So what are you saying, Uncle?"

"That these things *don't* happen is because of the second law of thermodynamics, which states that disorder in the universe *always* increases; the amount of this disorder is a quantity known as entropy."

"So how does this relate to coincidences?"

"I'm getting to that," muttered Mycroft, gradually warming up to his explanation and becoming more and more animated each second. "Imagine a box with a partition--the left side is filled with gas, the right a vacuum. Remove the partition and the gas will expand into the other side of the box--yes?"

I nodded.

"And you wouldn't expect the gas to cramp itself up in the left-hand

side again, would you?"

"No."

"Ah!" replied Mycroft with a knowing smile. "Not *quite* right. You see, since every interaction of gas atom is reversible, sometime, sooner or later, the gas *must* cramp itself back into the left-hand side!"

"It must?"

"Yes; the key here is *how much later*. Since even a small box of gas might contain 10<sup>20</sup> atoms, the time taken for them to try all *possible* combinations would take far longer than the age of the universe; a decrease in entropy strong enough to allow gas to separate, a shattered glass to re-form or the statue of St. Zvlkx outside to get down and walk to the pub is not, I think, against any physical laws but just fantastically unlikely."

"So," I said slowly, "what you are saying is that really *really* weird coincidences are caused by a drop in entropy?"

"Exactly so. But it's only a theory. As to why entropy might spontaneously decrease and how one might conduct experiments into localized entropic field decrease, I have only a few untried notions that I won't trouble you with here, but look, take this--it could save your life."

He picked up a jam jar from one of the many worktops and passed it to me. It seemed the contents were half rice and half lentils.

"I'm not hungry, thanks," I told him.

"No, no. I call this device an entroposcope. Shake it for me."

I shook the jam jar and the rice and lentils settled together in that sort of random clumping way that chance usually dictates.

"So?" I asked.

"Entirely usual," replied Mycroft. "Standard clumping, entropy levels normal. Shake it every now and then. You'll know when a decrease in entropy occurs as the rice and lentils will separate out into more ordered patterns--and *that's* the time to watch out for ludicrously unlikely coincidences."

Polly entered the workshop and gave her husband a hug.

"Hello, you two," she said. "Having fun?"

"I'm showing Thursday what I've been up to, my dear," replied Mycroft graciously.

"Did you show her your memory erasure device, Crofty?"

"No, he didn't," I said.

"Yes, I *did*," replied Mycroft with a smile, adding: "You're going to have to leave me, pet--I've work to do. I retire in fifty-six minutes precisely."

My father didn't turn up that evening, much to my mother's disappointment. At five minutes to ten, Mycroft, true to his word and

with Polly behind him, emerged from his laboratory to join us for dinner.

Next family dinners are always noisy affairs, and tonight was no different. Landen sat next to Orville and did a very good impression of someone who was trying not to be bored. Joffy, who was next to Wilbur, thought his new job was utter crap, and Wilbur, who had been needled by Joffy for at least three decades, replied that he thought the Global Standard Deity Faith was the biggest load of phony codswallop he had ever come across.

"Ah," replied Joffy loftily, "wait until you meet the Brotherhood of Unconstrained Verbosity."

Gloria and Charlotte always sat next to each other, Gloria to talk about something trivial--such as buttons--and Charlotte to agree with her. Mum and Polly talked about the Women's Federation and I sat next to Mycroft.

"What will you do in your retirement, Uncle?"

"I don't know, pet. I have some books I've been wanting to write for some time."

"About your work?"

"Much too dull. Can I try an idea out on you?"

"Sure."

He smiled, looked around, lowered his voice and leaned closer.

"Okay, here it is. Brilliant young surgeon Dexter Colt starts work at the highly efficient yet underfunded children's hospital doing pioneering work on relieving the suffering of orphaned amputees. The chief nurse is the headstrong yet beautiful Tiffany Lampe. Tiffany has only recently recovered from her shattered love affair with anesthetist Dr. Burns, and--"

"--they fall in love?" I ventured.

Mycroft's face fell.

"You've heard it then?"

"The bit about the orphaned amputees is good," I said, trying not to dishearten him. "What are you going to call it?"

"I thought of *Love Among the Orphans*. What do you think?"

By the end of the meal Mycroft had outlined several of his books to me, each one with a plot more lurid than the last. At the same time Joffy and Wilbur had come to blows in the garden, discussing the sanctity of peace and forgiveness amidst the thud of fists and the crunch of broken noses.

At midnight Mycroft took Polly in his arms and thanked us all for coming.

"I have spent my entire life in pursuit of scientific truth and enlightenment," he announced grandly, "of answers to conundrums and unifying theories of everything. Perhaps I should have spent the

time going out more. In fifty-four years neither Polly nor I have ever taken a holiday, so that is where we're off to now."

We walked into the garden, the family wishing Mycroft and Polly well on their travels. Outside the door of the workshop they stopped and looked at each other, then at all of us.

"Well, thanks for the party," said Mycroft. "Pear soup followed by pear stew with pear sauce and finishing with *bombe surprise*--which was pear--was quite a treat. Unusual, but quite a treat. Look after Mycroft while I'm away, Wilbur, and thanks for all the meals, Wednesday. Right, that's it," concluded Mycroft. "We're off. Toodle-oo."

"Enjoy yourselves," I said.

"Oh, we will!" he said, bidding us all goodbye again and disappearing into the workshop. Polly kissed us all, waved farewell and followed him, closing the door behind her.

"It won't be the same without him and his daft projects, will it?" said Landen.

"No," I replied. "It's--"

There was a tingling sensation like an electrical storm in summer as a noiseless white light erupted from within the workshop and shone in pencil-thin beams from every crack and rivet hole, each speck of grime showing up on the dirty windows, every crack in the glass suddenly alive with a rainbow of colors. We winced and shielded our eyes, but no sooner had the light started than it had gone again, faded to nothing in a crackle of electricity. Landen and I exchanged looks and stepped forward. The door opened easily and we stood there, staring into the large and now very empty workshop. Every single piece of equipment had gone. Not a screw, not a bolt, not a washer.

"He isn't just going to write romantic novels in his retirement," observed Joffy, putting his head round the door.

"No," I replied, "he most probably took it all so no one else would carry on with his work. Mycroft's scruples were the equal of his intellect."

My mother was sitting on an upturned wheelbarrow, her dodos clustered around her on the off chance of a marshmallow.

"They're not coming back," said my mother sadly. "You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," I said, giving her a hug, "I know."

## White Horse, Uffington, Picnics, for the Use of

We decided that "Parke-Laine-Next" was a bit of a mouthful, so I kept my surname and he kept his. I called myself "Ms." instead of "Miss," but nothing else changed. I liked being called his wife in the same way I liked calling Landen my husband. It felt sort of *tingly*. I had the same feeling when I stared at my wedding ring. They say you get used to it but I hoped that they were wrong. Marriage, like spinach and opera, was something I had never thought I would like. I changed my mind about opera when I was nine years old. My father took me to the first night of *Madama Butterfly* at Brescia in 1904. After the performance Dad cooked while Puccini regaled me with hilarious stories and signed my autograph book--from that day on I was a devoted fan. In the same way, it took being in love with Landen to make me change my mind about marriage. I found it exciting and exhilarating; two people, together, as one. It was where I was meant to be. I was happy; I was contented; I was fulfilled.

And spinach? Well, I'm still waiting.

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*Private Diaries*

WHAT DO YOU THINK they'll do?" asked Landen as we lay in bed, he with one hand resting gently on my stomach and the other wrapped tightly around me. The bedclothes had been thrown off and we had only just regained our breath.

"Who?"

"SO-1 this afternoon. About you punching the neanderthal."

"Oh, *that*. I don't know. Technically speaking, I really haven't done anything wrong at all--I think they'll let me off, considering all the good PR work I've done. Look a bit daft to arrest their star operative, don't you think?"

"That's always assuming they think logically like you or me."

"It is, isn't it?"

I sighed.

"People *have* been busted for less. SO-1 like to make an example from time to time."

"You don't *have* to work, you know."

I looked across at him, but he was too close to focus on, which was sort of nice, in its way.

"I know," I replied, "but I'd like to keep it up. I don't really see myself as a mummsy sort of person."

"Your cooking might tend to support that fact."

"Mother's cooking is terrible, too--I think it's hereditary. My SO-1 hearing is at four. Want to go and see the mammoth migration?"

"Sure."



The doorbell rang.

"Who could that be?"

"It's a little early to tell," quipped Landen. "I understand the 'go and see' technique sometimes works."

"Very funny."

I pulled on some clothes and went downstairs. There was a gaunt man with lugubrious features standing on the doorstep. He looked as close to a bloodhound as one can get without actually having a tail and barking.

"Yes?"

He raised his hat and gave me a somnambulant smile.

"The name is Hopkins," he explained. "I'm a reporter for *The Owl*. I was wondering if I could interview you about your time within the pages of *Jane Eyre*."

"You'll have to go through Cordelia Flakk at SpecOps, I'm afraid. I'm not really at liberty--"

"I know you were inside the book. In the first and original ending, Jane goes to India, yet in *your* ending she stays and marries Rochester. How did you engineer this?"

"You really have to get clearance from Flakk, Mr. Hopkins."

He sighed.

"Okay, I will. Just one thing. Did you prefer the new ending, *your* new ending?"

"Of course. Didn't you?"

Mr. Hopkins scribbled in a notepad and smiled again.

"Thank you, Miss Next. I'm very much in your debt. Good day!"

He raised his hat again and was gone.

"What was all that about?" asked Landen as he handed me a cup of coffee.

"Pressman."

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing. He has to go through Flakk."

The grassy escarpment at Uffington was busy that morning. The mammoth population in England, Wales and Scotland amounted to 249 individuals in nine groups, all of whom migrated north to south around late autumn and back again in the spring. The routes followed the same pattern every year with staggering accuracy. Inhabited areas were mostly avoided--except Devizes, where the High Street was shuttered up and deserted twice a year as the plodding elephantines crashed and trumpeted their way through the center of the town, cheerfully following the ancient call of their forebears. No one in Devizes could get any sleep or Proboscidea damage insurance cover, but the extra cash from tourism generally made up for it.

But there weren't just mammoth twitchers, walkers, druids and a neanderthal "right to hunt" protest up the hill that morning. A dark blue automobile was waiting for us, and when somebody is waiting for you in a place you hadn't planned on being, then you take notice. There were three of them standing next to the car, all dressed in dark suits with blue enameled Goliath badges on their lapels. The only one I recognized was Schitt-Hawse; they all hastily hid their ice creams as we approached.

"Mr. Schitt-Hawse," I said, "what a surprise! Have you met my husband?"

Schitt-Hawse offered his hand, but Landen didn't take it. The Goliath agent grimaced for a moment, then gave a bemused grin.

"Saw you on the telly, Ms. Next. It was a *fascinating* talk about dodos, I must say."

"I'd like to expand my subjects next time," I replied evenly. "Might even try and include something about Goliath's malignant stranglehold on the nation."

Schitt-Hawse shook his head sadly.

"Unwise, Next, unwise. What you singularly fail to grasp is that Goliath is all you'll ever need. All *anyone* will ever need. We manufacture everything from cots to coffins and employ over eight million people in our six thousand or so subsidiary companies. Everything from the womb to the wooden overcoat."

"And how much profit do you expect to scavenge as you massage us from hatched to dispatched?"

"You can't put a price on human happiness, Next. Political and economic uncertainty are the two biggest forms of stress. You'll be pleased to know that the Goliath Cheerfulness Index has reached a four-year high this morning at nine point one three."

"Out of a hundred?" asked Landen sarcastically.

"Out of *ten*, Mr. Parke-Laine," he replied testily. "The nation has grown beyond all measure under our guidance."

"Growth purely for its own sake is the philosophy of cancer, Schitt-Hawse."

His face dropped and he stared at us for a moment, doubtless wondering how best to continue.

"So," I said politely, "out to watch the mammoths?"

"Goliath don't watch mammoths, Next. There's no profit in it. Have you met my associates Mr. Chalk and Mr. Cheese?"

I looked at his two gorillalike lackeys. They were immaculately dressed, had impeccably trimmed goatees, and stared at me through impenetrable dark glasses.

"Which is which?" I asked.

"I'm Cheese," said Cheese.

"I'm Chalk," said Chalk.

"When is he going to ask you about Jack Schitt?" asked Landen in an unsobly loud whisper.

"Pretty soon," I replied.

Schitt-Hawse shook his head sadly. He opened the briefcase Mr. Chalk was holding, and inside, nestled in the carefully cut foam innards, lay a copy of *The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*.

"You left Jack imprisoned in this copy of 'The Raven.' Goliath need him out to face a disciplinary board on charges of embezzlement, Goliath contractual irregularities, misuse of the corporation's leisure facilities, missing stationery--and crimes against humanity."

"Oh yes?" I asked. "Why not just leave him in?"

Schitt-Hawse sighed and stared at me.

"Listen, Next. We need Jack out of here, and believe me, we'll manage it."

"Not with my help."

Schitt-Hawse stared silently at me for a moment.

"Goliath are not used to being refused. We asked your uncle to build another Prose Portal. He told us to come back in a month's time. We understand he left on retirement last night. Destination?"

"Not a clue."

Mycroft had retired, it seemed, not out of choice but out of necessity. I smiled to myself. Goliath had been hoodwinked and they didn't like it.

"Without the Portal," I told him, "I can't jump into books any more than Mr. Chalk can."

Chalk shuffled slightly as I mentioned his name.

"You're lying," replied Schitt-Hawse. "The ineptness card doesn't work on us. You defeated Hades, Jack Schitt and the Goliath Corporation. We have a great deal of admiration for you. Goliath has been more than fair given the circumstances, and we would hate for you to become a victim of *corporate impatience*."

"Corporate impatience?" I repeated, staring Schitt-Hawse straight in the eye. "What's that, some sort of threat?"

"This unhelpful attitude of yours might make me vindictive-- and you wouldn't like me when I get vindictive."

"I don't like you when you're *not* vindictive."

Schitt-Hawse shut the briefcase with a snap. His left eye twitched and the color drained out of his face. He looked at us both and started to say something, stopped, got ahold of his temper and managed to squeeze out a half-smile before he climbed back into his car with Chalk and Cheese and was gone.

Landen was still chuckling as we spread a groundsheet and blanket on

the well-nibbled grass just above the White Horse. Below us at the bottom of the escarpment a herd of mammoths were quietly browsing, and on the horizon we could see several airships on the approach to Oxford. It was a pleasant day, and since airships don't fly in poor weather, they were all making the best use of it.

"You don't have much fear of Goliath, do you, darling?" he asked.

I shrugged.

"Goliath are nothing more than a bully, Land. Stand up to them and they'll soon scurry away. All that large car and henchman stuff--it's for frighteners. But I'm kind of puzzled as to how they knew we would be here."

Landen shrugged.

"Cheese or ham?"<sup>1</sup>

"What?"

"I said: 'Cheese or ham.'"

"Not *you*."

Landen looked around. We were about the only ones within a hundred-yard radius.

"Who then?"

"Snell."

"Who?"

"Snell!" I yelled out loud. "Is that you?"<sup>2</sup>

"I didn't!"<sup>3</sup>

"Prosecution? Who?"<sup>4</sup>

"Thursday," said Landen, now looking worried, "what the hell's going on?"

"I'm talking to my lawyer."

"What have you done wrong?"

"I'm not sure."

Landen threw his hands up in the air and I addressed Snell again.

"Can you tell me the charge I'm facing *at the very least*?"<sup>5</sup>

I sighed.

"She's not married, apparently."<sup>6</sup>

"Snell! Wait! Snell? Snell--!"

But he had gone. Landen was staring at me.

"How long have you been like this, darling?"

"I'm fine, Land. But something weird is going on. Can we drop it for the moment?"

Landen looked at me, then at the clear blue sky and then at the cheese he was still holding.

"Cheese or ham?" he said at last.

"Both--but go easy on the cheese; this is a very limited supply."

"Where did you find it?" asked Landen, looking at the anonymously wrapped block suspiciously.

"From Joe Martlet at the Cheese Squad. They intercept about twelve tons a week coming over the Welsh border. It seems a shame to burn it, so everyone at SpecOps gets a pound or two. You know what they say: 'Cops have the best cheese.' "

"Goodbye, Thursday," muttered Landen, looking at the ham.

"Are you going somewhere?" I replied, unsure of what he meant.

"Me? No. Why?"

"You just said 'Goodbye.' "

"No," he laughed, "I was commenting on the ham. It's a *good buy*."

"Oh."

He cut me a slice and put it with the cheese in a sandwich, then made one for himself. There was a distant trumpet of a mammoth as it made heavy weather of the escarpment and I took a bite.

"It's farewell and so long, Thursday."

"Are you doing this on purpose?"

"Doing what? Isn't that Major Tony *Fairwelle* and your old school chum *Sue Long* over there?"

I turned to where Landen was pointing. It was Tony and Sue, and they waved cheerily before walking across to say hello.

"Goodness!" said Tony when they had seated themselves. "Looks like the regimental get-together is early this year! Remember Sarah Nara, who lost an ear at Bilohirsk? I just met her in the car park; quite a *coincidence*."

As he said the word my heart missed a beat. I rummaged in my jacket pocket for the entroposcope Mycroft had given me.

"What's the matter, Thurs?" asked Landen. "You're looking kind of . . . odd."

"I'm checking for coincidences," I muttered, shaking the jam jar of mixed lentils and rice. "It's not as stupid as it sounds."

The two pulses had gathered in a sort of swirly pattern. Entropy was decreasing by the second.

"We're out of here," I said to Landen, who looked at me quizzically. "Let's go. Leave the things."

"What's the problem, Thurs?"

"I've just spotted my old croquet captain, *Alf Widdershaine*. This is *Sue Long* and Tony *Fairwelle*; they just saw *Sarah Nara*-- see a pattern emerging?"

"Thursday--!" sighed Landen. "Aren't you being a little--"

"Want me to prove it? Excuse me!" I said, shouting to a passerby. "What's your name?"

"Bonnie," she said. "Bonnie Voige. Why?"

"See?"

"Voige is *not* a rare name, Thurs. There are probably *hundreds* of them up here."

"All right, smarty-pants, *you* try."

"I will," replied Landen indignantly, heaving himself to his feet.  
"Excuse me!"

A young woman stopped, and Landen asked her name.

"Violet," she replied.

"You see?" said Landen. "There's nothing--"

"Violet *De'ath*," continued the woman. I shook the entroposcope again--the lentils and rice had separated almost entirely.

I clapped my hands impatiently. Tony and Sue looked perturbed but got to their feet nonetheless.

"Everybody! Let's *go*!" I shouted.

"But the cheese--!"

"Bugger the cheese, Landen, trust me--*please*!"

They all grudgingly joined me, confused and annoyed at my strange behavior. Their minds changed when, following a short *whooshing* noise, a large and very heavy Hispano-Suiza motorcar landed on the freshly vacated picnic blanket with a teeth-jarring *thump* that shook the ground and knocked us to our knees. We were showered with soil, pebbles, and a grassy sod or two as the vast phaeton-bodied automobile sank itself into the soft earth, the fine bespoke body bursting at the seams as the massive chassis twisted with the impact. One of the spoked wheels broke free and whistled past my head as the heavy engine, torn from its rubber mounting blocks, ripped through the polished bonnet and landed at our feet with a heavy thud. There was silence for a moment as we all stood up, brushed ourselves off and checked for any damage. Landen had cut his hand on a piece of twisted wing mirror, but apart from that-- miraculously, it seemed--no one had been hurt. The huge motorcar had landed so perfectly on the picnic that the blanket, thermos, basket, food--everything, in fact--had disappeared from sight. In the deathly hush that followed, everyone in the small group was staring--not at the twisted wreck of the car, but at me, their mouths open. I stared back, then looked slowly upwards to where a large airship freighter was still flying, minus a couple of tons of freight, on to the north and--one presumes--a lengthy stop for an accident inquiry. I shook the entroposcope and the random clumping pattern returned.

"Danger's passed," I announced.

"You haven't changed, Thursday Next!" said Sue angrily. "Whenever you're about, something dangerously *other* walks with you. There's a reason I didn't keep in contact after school, you know--*weirdbird*! Tony, we're leaving."

Landen and I stood and watched them go. He put his arm round me.

"*Weirdbird*?" he asked.

"They used to call me that at school," I told him. "It's the price for

being different."

"You got a bargain. I would have paid *double* that to be different. Come on, let's skedaddle."

We slipped quietly away as a crowd gathered around the twisted automobile, the incident generating all manner of "instant experts" who all had theories on why an airship should jettison a car. So to a background chorus of "needed more lift" and "golly, that was close" we crept away and sat in my car.

"That's not something you see very often," murmured Landen after a pause. "What's going on?"

"I don't know, Land. There are a few too many coincidences around at present--I think someone's trying to kill me."

"I love it when you're being weird, darling, but don't you think you are taking this a little too far? Even if you *could* drop a car from a freighter, no one could hope to hit a picnic blanket from five thousand feet. Think about it, Thurs--it makes no sense at all. Who would *do* something like this anyway?"

"Hades," I whispered.

"Hades is *dead*, Thursday. You killed him yourself. It was a coincidence, pure and simple. They mean nothing--you might as well rail against your dreams or bark at shadows on the wall."

We drove in silence to the SpecOps building and my disciplinary hearing. I switched off the engine and Landen held my hand tightly.

"You'll be fine," he assured me. "They'd be nuts to take any action against you. If things get bad, just remember what Flanker rhymes with."

I smiled at the thought. He said he'd wait for me in the cafe across the road, kissed me again and limped off.

## 8.

### Mr. Stiggins and SO-1

Contrary to popular belief, neanderthals are not stupid. Poor reading and writing skills are due to fundamental differences in visual acuity--in humans it is called dyslexia. Facial acuity in neanderthals, however, is highly developed--the same silence might have thirty or more different meanings depending on how you looked. "Neanderthal English" has a richness and meaning that is lost on the relatively facially blind human. Because of this highly developed facial grammar, neanderthals instinctively know when someone is lying--hence their total disinterest in plays, films or politicians. They like stories read out loud and speak of the weather a great deal--another area in which they are expert. They never throw anything away and love tools, especially power tools. Of the three cable channels allocated to neanderthals, two of them show nothing but woodworking programs.

GERHARD VON SQUID,  
*Neanderthals: Back After a Short Absence*

**T**HURSDAY NEXT?" inquired a tall man with a gravelly voice as soon as I stepped into the SpecOps building.

"Yes?"

He flashed a badge.

"Agent Walken, SO-5; this is my associate, James Dedmen."

Dedmen tipped his hat politely and I shook their hands.

"Can we talk somewhere privately?" asked Walken.

I took them down the corridor and we found an empty interview room.

"I'm sorry about Phodder and Kannon," I told them as soon as we had sat down.

"They were careless," intoned Dedmen gravely. "Contact adhesive should always be used in a well-ventilated room--it says so on the tin."

"We were wondering," asked Walken in a slightly embarrassed manner, "whether you could fill us in on what they were up to; they both died before submitting a report."

"What happened to their case notes?"

Dedmen and Walken exchanged looks.

"They were eaten by rabbits."

"How could *that* happen?"

"Classified," announced Dedmen. "We analyzed the remains but everything was pretty well digested--except these."

He placed three small scraps of tattered and stained paper wrapped in cellophane on the desk. I leaned closer. I could just read out part of my name on the first one, the second was a fragment of a credit card statement, and the third had a single name on it that gave me a



shiver: *Hades*.

"Hades?" I queried. "Do you think he's still alive?"

"You killed him, Next--what do you think?"

I had seen him die up there on the roof at Thornfield and even found his charred remains when we searched the blackened ruins. But Hades had died before--or so he had made us believe.

"As sure as I can be. What does the credit card statement mean?"

"Again," replied Walken, "we're not sure. The card was stolen. Most of these purchases are of women's clothes, shoes, hats, bags and so forth--we've got Dorothy Perkins and Camp Hopson under twenty-four-hour observation. Does any of this ring any bells?"

I shook my head.

"Then tell us about your meeting with Phodder."

I told them as much as I could about our short meeting while they made copious notes.

"So they wanted to know if anything odd had happened to you recently?" asked Walken. "Had it?"

I told them about the Skyrail and the Hispano-Suiza and they made even more notes. Finally, after asking me several times whether there was anything more I could add, they got up and Walken handed me his card.

"If you discover anything at all--?"

"No problem," I replied. "I hope you catch them."

They grunted in reply and left.

I sighed, got up and walked back into the lobby to await Flanker and SO-1. I watched the busy station around me and then suddenly felt very hot as the room started to swim. The sides of my vision started to fade and if I hadn't put my head between my knees I would have passed out there and then. The buzz from the room became a dull rumble and I closed my eyes, temples thumping. I stayed there for several moments until the nausea lessened. I opened my eyes and stared at the flecks of mica in the concrete floor.

"Lost something, Next?" came Flanker's familiar voice.

I very gently raised my head. He was reading some notes and spoke without looking at me.

"I'm running late--someone's misappropriated an entire cheese seizure. Fifteen minutes, interview room three--be there."

He strode off without waiting for a reply and I stared at the floor again. Somehow Flanker and SpecOps seemed insignificant given that this time next year I could be a mother. Landen had enough money for us both and it wasn't as though I needed to actually resign--I could go on the SpecOps reservist list and do the odd job when necessary. I was just starting to ponder on whether I was really cut out for motherhood

when I felt a hand on my shoulder and someone pushed a glass of water into my line of vision. I gratefully took the glass and drank half of it before looking up at my rescuer. It was a neanderthal dressed in a neat double-breasted suit with an SO-13 badge clipped to its top pocket.

"Hello, Mr. Stiggins," I said, recognizing him.

"Hello, Ms. Next--the nausea will pass."

There was a shudder and the world whirled backwards in time a couple of seconds so suddenly it made me jump. Stiggins spoke again but this time made less sense:

"Helto, our m Ms. Next--the nauplea will knoass."

"What the hell--" I muttered as the lobby snapped backwards again and the mauve-painted walls switched to green. I looked at Stiggins, who said:

"Hatto, is our am Mss Next--bue nauplea will kno you."

The people in the lobby were now wearing hats. Stiggins jumped back again and said:

"Thato is our ame Miss Next--bue howplea kno you?"

My feet felt strange as the world rippled again and I looked down and saw that I was wearing trainers instead of boots. It was clear now that time was flexing slightly, and I expected my father to appear, but he didn't. Stiggins flicked back to the beginning of his sentence yet again and said, this time in a voice I could make out clearly:

"That is our name, Miss Next, but how know you?"

"Did you feel anything odd just then?"

"No. Drink the water. You are very pale."

I had another sip, leaned back and took a deep breath.

"This wall used to be mauve," I mused as Stiggins looked at me.

"How you know our name, Miss Next?"

"You turned up at my wedding party," I told him. "You said you had a job for me."

He stared at me for almost half a minute through his deep-set eyes. His large nose sniffed the air occasionally. Neanderthals thought a great deal about what they said before they said it--if they said anything at all.

"You speak the truth," he said at last. It was almost impossible to lie to a neanderthal, and I wasn't going to try. "We are to represent you on this case, Miss Next."

I sighed. Flanker was taking no chances; I had nothing against neanderthals, but they wouldn't have been my first choice to defend me, particularly against an attack on one of their own.

"If you have a problem you should tell us," said Stiggins, eyeing me carefully.

"I have no problem with you representing me."

"Your face does not match your words. You think we have been placed here to hurt your case. It is our belief too. But as to whether it *will* hurt your case, we shall see. Are you well enough to walk?"

I said I was, and we went and sat down in the interview room. Stiggins opened his case and drew out a buff file. It was a large-print version made out in underlined capitals. He brought out a wooden ruler and placed it across the page to help him read.

"Why you hit Kaylieu, the Skyrail operator?"

"I thought he had a gun."

"Why would you think that?"

I stared into Mr. Stiggins's unblinking brown eyes. If I lied he would know. If I told him the truth he might feel it his duty to tell SO-1 that I had been involved in my father's work. With the world due to end and the trust in my father implicit, it was a sticky moment, to say the least.

"*They* will ask you, Miss Next. Your evasion will not be appreciated."

"I'll have to take that chance."

Stiggins tilted his head to one side and regarded me for a moment.

"They know about your father, Miss Next. We advise you to be careful."

I didn't say anything, but to Stiggins I probably spoke volumes. Half the thal language is about body movements. It's possible to conjugate verbs with facial muscles; dancing is conversation.

We didn't have a chance to say anything else as the door opened and Flanker and two other agents trooped in.

"You know my name," he told me. "These are Agents King and Nosmo."

The two officers stared at me unnervingly.

"This is a preliminary interview," announced Flanker, who now fixed me with a steely gaze. "There will be time enough for a full inquiry--if we so decide. Anything you say and do can affect the outcome of the hearing. It's really up to you, Next."

He wasn't kidding. SO-1 were not within the law--they *made* the law. If they really meant business I wouldn't be here at all-- I'd be spirited away to SpecOps Grand Central, wherever the hell that was. It was at times like this that I suddenly realized quite why my father had rebelled against SpecOps in the first place.

Flanker placed two tapes into the recorder and idented it with the date, time and all our names. Once done, he asked in a voice made more menacing by its softness: "You know why you are here?"

"For hitting a Skyrail operator?"

"Striking a neanderthal is hardly a crime worthy of SO-1's valuable time, Miss Next. In fact, technically speaking, it's not a crime at all."

"What then?"

"When did you last see your father?"

The other SpecOps agents leaned forward imperceptibly to hear my answer. I wasn't going to make it easy for them.

"I don't have a father, Flanker--you know that. He was eradicated by your buddies in the ChronoGuard seventeen years ago."

"Don't play me for a fool, Next," warned Flanker. "This is not something I care to joke about. *Despite* Colonel Next's non-actualization he continues to be a thorn in our side. Again: When did you last see your father?"

"At my wedding."

Flanker frowned and looked at his notes.

"You married? When?"

I told him, and he squiggled a note in the margin.

"And what did he say when he turned up at your wedding?"

"Congratulations."

He stared at me for a few moments, then changed tack.

"This incident with the Skyrail operator," he began. "You were convinced that he had a *soap* gun hidden about his person. According to a witness you thumped him on the chin, handcuffed and searched him. They said you seemed very surprised when you didn't find anything."

I shrugged and remained silent.

"We don't give a sod about the thal, Next. Your father's deputizing you is something we could overlook--replacing you out-of-time is something we most definitely will *not*. Is this what happened?"

"Is that the charge? Is that why I'm here?"

"Answer the question."

"No sir."

"You're lying. He brought you back early but your father's control of the timestream is not that good. Mr. Kaylieu decided *not* to threaten the Skyrail that morning. You were *sideslipped*, Next. Joggled slightly in the timestream. Things happened the same way but not *exactly* in the same order. Not a big one either--barely a Class IX. Sideslips are an occupational hazard in ChronoGuard work."

"That's preposterous," I scoffed. Stiggins would know I was lying, but perhaps I could fool Flanker.

"I don't think you understand, Miss Next. This is more important than just you or your father. Two days ago we lost all communications beyond the 12th December. We know there is industrial action, but even the freelancers we've sent upstream haven't reported back. We think it's *the Big One*. If your father was willing to risk using you, we reckon he thinks so too. Despite our animosity for your father, he knows his business--if he didn't we'd have had him years from now. *What's going on?*"

"I just thought he had a gun," I repeated.

Flanker stared at me silently for a few moments.

"Let's start again, Miss Next. You search a neanderthal for a fake gun he carries the following day, you apologize to him using his name, and the arresting officer at the Skyrail station tells me she saw you resetting your watch. A bit *out of time*, were you?"

"What do you mean, 'for a fake gun he carries the following day'?"

Flanker answered without the merest trace of emotion. "Kaylieu was shot dead this morning. I think you should talk and talk fast. I've enough to loop you for twenty years. Fancy that?"

I glared back at him, at a loss to know what to do or say. "Looping" was a slang term for Closed Loop Temporal Field Containment. They popped the criminal in an eight-minute repetitive time loop for five, ten, twenty years. Usually it was a Laundromat, doctor's waiting room or bus stop, and your presence often caused time to slow down for others near the loop. Your body aged but never needed sustenance. It was cruel and unnatural--yet cheap and required no bars, guards or food.

I opened my mouth and shut it again, gaping like a fish.

"Or you can tell us about your father and walk out a free woman."

I felt a prickly sweat break out on my forehead. I stared at Flanker and he stared at me, until, mercifully, Stiggins came to my rescue.

"Miss Next was working for us at SO-13 that morning, Commander," he said in a low monotone. "Kaylieu had been implicated in neanderthal sedition. It was a secret operation. Thank you, Miss Next, but we will have to tell SO-1 the truth."

Flanker shot an angry glance at the neanderthal, who stared back at him impassively.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me this, Stiggins?"

"You never asked."

All Flanker had on me now was a slow watch. He lowered his voice to a growl.

"I'll see you looped behind the Crunch if your father is up to no good and you didn't tell us."

He paused for a moment and jabbed a finger in the direction of Stiggins.

"If you've been bearing false witness I'll have you too. You're running the thal end of SO-13 for one reason and one reason only--window dressing."

"How you managed to become the dominant species we will never know," Stiggins said at last. "So full of hate, anger and vanity."

"It's our evolutionary edge, Stiggins. Change and adapt to a hostile environment. We did, you didn't. QED."

"Darwin won't mask your sins, Flanker," replied Stiggins. "*You* made

our environment hostile. You will fall too. But you won't fall because of a more dominant life form. You will fall over *yourselves*."

"Garbage, Stiggins. You lot had your chance and blew it."

"We have right to health, freedom and pursuit of happiness, too."

"Legally speaking you don't," replied Flanker evenly. "Those rights belong only to *humans*. If you want equality, speak to Goliath. They sequenced you. They *own* you. If you get lucky, perhaps you can be *at risk*. Beg and we might make you *endangered*."

Flanker shut my file with a snap, grabbed his hat, removed both interview tapes and was gone without another word.

As soon as the door closed I breathed a sigh of relief. My heart was going like a trip-hammer but I still had my liberty.

"I'm sorry about Mr. Kaylieu."

Stiggins shrugged.

"He was not happy, Miss Next. He did not ask to come back."

"You *lied* for me," I added in a disbelieving tone. "I thought neanderthals couldn't lie."

He stared at me for a moment or two.

"It's not that we can't," he said at last. "We just have no reason to. We helped because you are a good person. You have sapien aggression, but you have compassion, too. If you need help again, we will be there."

Stiggins's normally placid and unmoving face curled up into a grimace that showed two rows of widely gapped teeth. I was fearful for a moment until I realized that what I was witnessing was a neanderthal *smile*.

"Miss Next--"

"Yes?"

"Our friends call us Stig."

"Mine call me Thursday."

He put out a large hand and I shook it gratefully.

"You're a good man, Stig."

"Yes," he replied slowly, "we were sequenced that way."

He gathered up his notes and left the room.

I left the SpecOps building ten minutes later and looked for Landen in the cafe opposite. He wasn't there, so I ordered a coffee and waited twenty minutes. He didn't turn up, so I left a message with the cafe owner and drove home, musing that with death-by-coincidence, the world ending in a fortnight, charges in a court for I didn't know what and a lost play by Shakespeare, things couldn't get much stranger. But I was wrong. I was *very* wrong.

## 9.

### The More Things Stay the Same

Minor changes to soft furnishings are the first indications of a sideslip. Curtains, cushion covers and lampshades are all good litmus indicators for a slight diversion in the timestream--the same way as canaries are used down the mines or goldfishes to predict earthquakes. Carpet and wallpaper patterns and changes in paint hues can also be used, but this requires a more practiced eye. If you are within the sideslip then you will notice nothing, but if your pelmets change color for no good reason, your curtains switch from festoon to swish or your antimacassars have a new pattern on them, I should be worried; and if you're the only one who notices, then worry some more. A great deal more . . .

BENDIX SCINTILLA,

*Timestream Navigation for CG Cadets Module IV*

LANDEN'S ABSENCE made me feel unsettled. All sorts of reasons as to why he wasn't waiting for me ran through my head as I pushed open the gate and walked up to our front door. He could have lost track of time, gone to pick up his running leg from the menders or dropped in to see his mum. But I was fooling myself. Landen said he would be there and he wasn't. And that wasn't like him. Not at all.

I stopped abruptly halfway up the garden path. For some reason Landen had taken the opportunity to change all the curtains. I walked on more slowly, a feeling of unease rising within me. I stopped at the front door. The footscrapper had gone. But it hadn't been taken recently--the hole had been concreted over long ago. There were other changes, too. A tub of withered *Tickia orologica* had appeared in the porch next to a rusty pogo stick and a broken bicycle. The dustbins were all plastic rather than steel, and a copy of Landen's least favorite paper, *The Mole*, was resting in the newspaper holder. I felt a hot flush rise in my cheeks as I fumbled in vain to find my door key--not that it would have mattered if I *had* found it, because the lock I used that morning had been painted over years ago.

I must have been making a fair amount of noise, because all of a sudden the door opened to reveal an elderly version of Landen complete with paunch, bifocals and a shiny bald pate.

"Yes?" he inquired in a slow Parke-Laine sort of baritone.

Filbert Snood's time aggregation sprang instantly--and unpleasantly--to mind.

"Oh my God. Landen? *Is that you?*"

The elderly man seemed almost as stunned as I was.

"Me? Good heavens, no!" he snapped and started to close the door.

"No one of that name lives here!"

I jammed my foot against the closing door. I'd seen it done in cop movies but the reality is somewhat different. I had forgotten I was wearing trainers and the weatherboard squashed my big toe. I yelped in pain, withdrew my foot and the door slammed shut.

"Buggeration!" I yelled as I hopped up and down. I pressed the doorbell long and hard but received only a muffled "Clear off!" for my troubles. I was just about to bang on the door when I heard a familiar voice ring out behind. I turned to find Landen's mum staring at me.

"Houson!" I cried. "Thank goodness! There's someone in our house and they won't answer, and . . . Houson?"

She was looking at me without a flicker of recognition.

"Houson?" I said again, taking a step towards her. "It's me, Thursday!"

She hurriedly took a pace backwards and corrected me sharply: "That's Mrs. Parke-Laine to you. What do you want?"

I heard the door open behind me. The elderly Landen-that-wasn't had returned.

"She's been ringing the doorbell," explained the man to Landen's mother. "She won't go away." He thought for a moment and then added in a quieter voice, "She's been asking about *Landen*."

"Landen?" replied Houson sharply, her glare becoming more baleful by the second. "How is Landen any business of *yours*?"

"He's my husband."

There was a pause as she mulled this over.

"Your sense of humor is severely lacking, Miss whoever-you-are," she retorted angrily, pointing towards the garden gate. "I suggest you leave."

"Wait a minute!" I exclaimed, almost wanting to laugh at the situation. "If I *didn't* marry Landen, then who gave me this wedding ring?"

I held up my left hand for them to see, but it didn't seem to have much effect. A quick glance told me why. I didn't *have* a wedding ring.

"Shit--!" I mumbled, looking around in a perplexed manner. "I must have dropped it somewhere--"

"You're very confused," said Houson more with pity than anger. She could see I wasn't dangerous--just positively, and irretrievably, insane. "Is there anyone we can call?"

"I'm *not* crazy," I declared, trying to get a grip on the situation. "This morning, no, less than *two hours ago*, Landen and I lived in this very house--"

I stopped. Houson had moved to the side of the man at the door. As they stood together in a manner bred of long association, I knew exactly who he was; it was Landen's father. Landen's *dead* father.



"You're *Billden*," I murmured. "You died when you tried to rescue . . ."

My voice trailed off. Landen had never known his father. Billden Parke-Laine had died saving the two-year-old Landen from a submerged car thirty-eight years ago. My heart froze as the true meaning of this bizarre confrontation began to dawn. Someone had eradicated Landen.

I put out a hand to steady myself, then sat quickly on the garden wall and closed my eyes as a dull thumping started up in my head. Not Landen, not now of all times--

"Billden," announced Houson, "you had better call the police--"

"NO!" I shouted, opening my eyes and glaring at him.

"You didn't go back, did you?" I said slowly, my voice cracking. "You didn't rescue him that night. You lived, and he--"

I braced myself for his anger, but it never came. Instead, Billden just stared at me with a mixture of pity and confusion on his face.

"I wanted to," he said in a quiet voice.

I swallowed my emotion.

"Where's Landen now?"

"If we tell you," asked Houson in a slow and patronizing tone, "will you promise to go away and never come back?"

She took my silence for assent and continued: "Swindon Municipal Cemetery--and you're right, our son drowned thirty-eight years ago."

"*Shit!*" I cried, my mind racing as I tried to figure out who might be responsible. Houson and Billden took a fearful step backwards. "Not you," I added hastily. "Goddammit, I'm being *blackmailed*."

"You should report that to SpecOps."

"They wouldn't believe me any more than you--"

I paused and thought for a moment.

"Houson, I know you have a good memory, because when Landen *did* exist, you and I were the best of pals. Someone has taken your son, my husband, and believe me, I'll get him back. But listen to me, I'm not crazy, and here's how I can prove it: He's allergic to bananas, has a mole on his neck--and a birthmark the shape of a lobster on his bum. How could I know that unless--?"

"Oh yes?" said Houson slowly, staring at me with growing interest. "This birthmark. Which cheek?"

"The left."

"Looking from the front, or looking from the back?"

"Looking from the back," I said without hesitating.

There was silence for a moment. They looked at each other, then at me, and in that instant, they *knew*. When Houson spoke it was in a quiet voice, her temper transplanted with a sadness all her own.

"How--how would he have turned out?"

She started to cry, large tears that rolled uninhibited down her cheeks; tears of loss, tears for what might have been.

"He was *wonderful*!" I returned gratefully. "Witty and generous and tall and clever--you would have been so proud!"

"What did he become?"

"A novelist," I explained. "Last year he won the Armitage Shanks Fiction Award for *Bad Sofa*. He lost a leg in the Crimea. We were married two months ago."

"Were we there?"

I looked at them both and said nothing. Houson had been there, of course, shedding tears of joy for us both--but Billden, well, Billden had swapped his life for Landen's when he returned to the submerged car and ended up in the Swindon Municipal Cemetery instead. We stood for a moment or two, the three of us lamenting the loss of Landen. Houson broke the silence.

"I think it would really be better for all concerned if you left now," she said quietly, "and please don't come back."

"Wait!" I said. "Was there someone there, someone who stopped you from rescuing him?"

"More than one," replied Billden. "Five or six--one woman; I was sat upon--"

"Was one a Frenchman? Tall, distinguished-looking? Named *Lavoisier*, perhaps?"

"I don't know," answered Billden sadly. "It was a long time ago."

"You really *have* to leave now," repeated Houson in a forthright tone.

I sighed, thanked them, and they shuffled back inside and closed the door.

I walked out of the garden gate and sat in my car, trying to contain the emotion within me so I could think straight. I was breathing heavily and my hands were clenched so tightly on the steering wheel my knuckles showed white. How could SpecOps do this to me? Was this Flanker's way of compelling me to talk about my father? I shook my head. Futzing with the timestream was a crime punishable by almost unimaginable brutality. I couldn't imagine Flanker would have risked his career--and his life--on a move so rash.

I took a deep breath and leaned forward to press the starter button. As I did so I glanced into my wing mirror and saw a Packard parked on the other side of the road. There was a well-dressed figure leaning on the wing, nonchalantly smoking a cigarette and looking in my direction. It was Schitt-Hawse. He appeared to be smiling. Suddenly, the whole plan came into sharp focus. Jack Schitt. What had Schitt-Hawse threatened me with? *Corporate impatience*? My anger

reestablished itself.

Muttering *Bastard!* under my breath I jumped out of the car and walked briskly and purposefully towards Schitt-Hawse, who stiffened slightly as I approached. I ignored a car that screeched to a halt inches from me and as Schitt-Hawse took a pace forward I put out both hands and pushed him hard against the car. He lost his footing and fell heavily to the ground; I was quickly upon him, grabbed his shirt lapels and raised a fist to punch him. But the blow never fell. In my blind anger I had failed to see that his associates Chalk and Cheese were close by, and they did their job admirably, efficiently and yes, painfully, too. I fought like hell and was gratified that in the confusion I managed to kick Schitt-Hawse hard on the kneecap--he yelped in pain. But my victory, such as it was, was short-lived. I must have been a tenth of their combined weight, and my struggles were soon in vain. They held me tightly, and Schitt-Hawse approached with an unpleasant smile etched upon his pinched features.

I did the first thing I could think of. I spat in his face. I'd never tried it before, but it turned out delightfully; I got him right in the eye.

He raised the back of his hand to strike me, but I didn't flinch--I just stared at him, anger burning in my eyes. He stopped, lowered his hand and wiped his face with a crisply laundered pocket handkerchief.

"You are going to have to control that temper of yours, Next."

"That's Mrs. Parke-Laine to you."

"Not anymore. If you'd stop struggling, perhaps we could talk sensibly, like adults. You and I need to come to an *arrangement*."

I gave up squirming, and the two men relaxed their grip. I straightened my clothes and glared at Schitt-Hawse, who rubbed his knee.

"What sort of arrangement?" I demanded.

"A trade," he answered. "Jack Schitt for Landen."

"Oh yes?" I retorted. "And how do I know I can trust you?"

"You can't and you don't," replied Schitt-Hawse simply, "but it's the best offer you're going to get."

"My father will help me."

Schitt-Hawse laughed.

"Your father is a washed-out clock jockey. I think you overestimate his chances--and his talents. Besides, we've got the summer of 1947 locked down so tight not even a transtemporal gnat could get back there without us knowing about it. Retrieve Jack from 'The Raven' and you can have your own dear hubby back."

"And how do you propose I do that?"

"You're a resourceful and intelligent woman--I'm sure you'll think of something. Do we have a deal?"

I stared hard at him, shaking with fury. Then, almost without

thinking, I had my automatic pressed against Schitt-Hawse's forehead. I heard two safety catches click off behind me. Associates Chalk and Cheese were fast, too.

Schitt-Hawse seemed unperturbed; he smiled at me in a supercilious manner and ignored the weapon.

"You won't kill me, Next," he said slowly. "It's not the way you do things. It might make you feel better, but believe me, it won't get your Landen back, and Mr. Chalk and Mr. Cheese would make quite sure you were dead long before you hit the asphalt."

Schitt-Hawse was good. He'd done his homework and he hadn't underestimated me one little bit. I'd do all I could to get Landen back, and he knew it. I reholstered my pistol.

"Splendid!" he enthused. "We'll be hearing from you in due course, I trust, hmm?"

## 10.

### A Lack of Differences

Landen Parke-Laine's eradication was the best I'd seen since Veronica Golightly's. They plucked him out and left everything else *exactly* as it was. Not a crude hatchet job like Churchill or Victor Borge--we got those sorted out eventually. What I never figured out was how they took him out and left her memories of him completely intact. Agreed, there would be no point to the eradication *without* her knowing what she had missed, but it still intrigued me over four centuries later. Eradication was never an exact art.

COLONEL NEXT,QT CG (nonexist.),  
*Upstream/Downstream* (unpublished)

I STARED AFTER their departing car, trying to figure out what to do. Finding a way into "The Raven" to release Jack Schitt would be my first priority. It wasn't going to be hard--it was going to be impossible. It wouldn't deter me. I'd done impossible things several times in the past, and the prospect didn't scare me as much as it used to. I thought of Landen and the last time I saw him, limping across to the cafe just opposite the SpecOps building. It was going to be his birthday in two weeks--we planned to take the airship to Spain, or somewhere hot for a break; we knew we wouldn't be able to go on holiday so easily once there was a baby--

The baby. With all that had happened, I didn't know whether I was still pregnant. I jumped into my car and screeched off into town, startling a few great auks who were picking their way through a nearby garbage can.

I was heading for the doctor's surgery on Shelley Street. Every shop I passed seemed to either stock prams or high chairs, toys or something else baby-related, and all the toddlers and infants, heavily pregnant women and prams in Swindon seemed to be crowding the route--and all staring at me. I skidded to a halt outside the surgery. It was a double yellow line and a traffic warden looked at me greedily.

"Hey!" I said, pointing a finger at her. "Expectant mother. Don't even *think* about it."

I dashed in and found the nurse I'd seen the day before.

"I was in here yesterday," I blurted out. "Was I pregnant?"

She looked at me without even the least vestige of surprise. I guess she was used to this sort of thing.

"Of course!" she replied. "Confirmation is in the post. Are you okay?"

I sat down heavily on a chair and burst into tears. The sense of relief was overwhelming. I had more than just Landen's memories--I

had his child, too. I rubbed my face with my hands. I'd been in a lot of difficult and dangerous life-or-death situations both in the military and law enforcement--but nothing even comes *close* to the tribulations of emotion. I'd face Hades again twice rather than go through that little charade again.

"Yes, yes," I assured her happily. "I really couldn't be better!"

"Good," beamed the nurse. "Is there anything else you'd like to know?"

"Yes, actually," I replied. "Tell me, where do I live?"

The shabby block of flats in the old town didn't look like my sort of place, but who knows where I might be living without Landen. I trotted briskly up the stairs to the top landing and flat six. I took a deep breath, unlocked and opened the door. There was a brief scabble of activity from the kitchen and Pickwick was there to greet me as usual, bearing a gift that turned out to be the torn cover off last month's *SpecOps-27 Gazette*. I closed the door with my foot as I tickled her under the chin and looked cautiously about. I was relieved to discover that despite the shabby exterior my apartment was south-facing, warm and quite comfortable. I couldn't remember a thing about any of it, of course, but I was glad to see that Pickwick's egg was still in residence. I walked softly around the flat, exploring my new surroundings. It seemed I painted a lot more without Landen about, and the walls were covered with half-finished canvases. There were several of Pickwick and the family which I could remember painting, and a few others that I couldn't--but none, sadly, of Landen. I looked at the other canvases and wondered why several included images of amphibious aircraft. I sat on the sofa, and when Pickwick came up to nuzzle me I put my hand on her head.

"Oh, Pickers," I murmured, "what shall we do?"

I sighed, tried to get Pickwick to stand on one leg with the promise of a marshmallow, failed, then made a cup of tea and something to eat before searching the rest of the apartment in an inquisitive sort of way. Most things were where I would expect to find them; there were more dresses in the closet than usual and I even found a few copies of *FeMole* stashed under the sofa. The fridge was well stocked with food, and it seemed that in this non-Landen world I was a vegetarian. There were a lot of things that I couldn't remember ever having acquired, including a table light shaped like a pineapple, a large enamel sign advertising Dr. Spong's footcare remedies and--slightly more worryingly--a size twelve pair of socks in the laundry and some boxer shorts. I rummaged further and found two tooth-brushes in the bathroom, a large Swindon Mallets jacket on the hook and several XXL-size T-shirts with *SpecOps-14 Swindon* written on them. I called

Bowden straightaway.

"Hello, Thursday," he said. "Have you heard? Professor Spoon has given his 100% backing to *Cardenio*--I've never heard him actually laugh before!"

"That's good, that's good," I said absently. "Listen, this might seem an odd question, but do I have a boyfriend?"

"A what?"

"A boyfriend. You know. A male friend I see on a regular basis for dinner and picnics and . . . *thingy*, y'know?"

"Thursday, are you okay?"

I took a deep breath and rubbed my neck.

"No, no, I'm not," I gabbled. "You see, my husband was eradicated this afternoon. I went to see SO-1 and just before I went in the walls changed color and Stig talked funny and Flanker didn't know I was married--which I'm not, I suppose--and then Houson didn't know me and Billedn *wasn't* in the cemetery but Landen *was* and Goliath said they'd bring him back if I got Jack Schitt out and I thought I'd lost Landen's baby which I haven't so everything was fine and now it's not fine anymore because *I've found an extra toothbrush and some men's clothes in my flat!*"

"Okay, okay," said Bowden in a soothing voice. "Slow down a bit and just let me think."

There was a pause as Bowden mulled all this over. When he answered his voice was tinged with urgency--and concern. I knew he was a good friend, but until now I never knew *how* good.

"Thursday. Calm down and listen to me. Firstly, *we keep this to ourselves*. Eradication can *never* be proved--mention this to anyone at SpecOps and the quacks will enforce your retirement on a Form D4. We don't want that. I'll try and fill you in with any lost memories I might have that you don't. What was the name of your husband, again?"

"Landen."

I found strength in his approach. You could always rely on Bowden to be analytical about a problem--no matter how strange it might seem. He made me go over the day again in more detail, something that I found very calming. I asked him again about a possible boyfriend.

"I'm not sure," he replied. "You're kind of a private person."

"Come on--office rumors, SpecOps gossip--there must be *something*."

"There *is* some talk, but I don't hear a lot of it, since I'm your partner. Your love life is a matter of some quiet speculation. They call you--"

He went quiet.

"What do they call me, Bowden?"

"You don't want to know."

"Tell me."

"All right," sighed Bowden. "It's--they call you the Ice Maiden."

"The Ice Maiden?"

"It's not as bad as my nickname," continued Bowden. "I'm known as Dead Dog."

"Dead dog?" I repeated, trying to sound as though I'd not heard it before. "Ice Maiden, eh? It's kind of, well, *corny*. Couldn't they think of something better? Anyway, did I have a boyfriend or not?"

"There was a rumor of someone over at SO-14--"

I held up the croquet jacket, trying to figure out how tall this unnamed beau might be.

"Do we have a positive ID?"

"I think it's only a rumor, Thursday."

"Tell me, Bowden."

"Miles," he said at last. "His name's Miles Hawke."

"Is it serious?"

"I have no idea. You don't talk about these things to me."

I thanked him and put the phone down nervously, butterflies dancing in my stomach. I knew I was still pregnant, but the trouble was: *who was the father?* If I had a casual boyfriend named Miles, then perhaps it *wasn't* Landen's after all. I called my mother, who seemed more interested in putting out a fire on the kitchen stove than in talking to me. I asked her when she last met one of my boyfriends and she said that if memory served, not for at least six years, and if I didn't hurry up and get married she was going to have to adopt some grandchildren-- or steal some from outside Tesco's, whichever was easier. I told her I would go out and look for one as soon as possible and put the phone down.

I paced the room in a flurry of nerves. If I *hadn't* introduced this Miles bloke to Mum, then it was quite likely he wasn't that serious; yet if he *did* leave his gear here then it undoubtedly *was*. I had an idea and rummaged in the bedside table and found a packet of unopened condoms which were three years out of date. I breathed a sigh of relief. This *did* sound more like me--unless Miles brought his own, of course--but then if I *had* a bun in the oven, then finding them was immaterial, as we didn't use them. Or perhaps the clothes weren't Miles's at all? And what about my memories? If they had survived, then surely Landen's share in Junior-to-be had *also* survived. I sat down on the bed and pulled out my hair tie. I ran my fingers through my hair, flopped backwards, covered my face and groaned--long and loud.



## 11.

### Granny Next

Young Thursday came that morning, as I knew she would. She had just lost Landen, as I had lost my own husband all those years ago. She had youth and hope on her side, and although she did not yet know it, she had plenty of what we call *the Other Stuff*. She would, I hoped, use it wisely. At the time not even her own father knew quite how important she was. More than Landen's life would depend on her. All life would depend on her, from the lowliest paramecium to the most complex life form that would ever exist.

From papers discovered in ex-SpecOps agent Next's effects

I TOOK PICKWICK to the park first thing in the morning. Perhaps it would be better to say that she took me--she was the one who knew the way. She played coyly with a few other dodos while I sat on a park bench. A crotchety old woman sat next to me and turned out to be Mrs. Scroggins, who lived directly below. She told me not to make so much noise in future, and then, without drawing breath, gave me a few extremely useful tips about smuggling pets in and out of the building. I picked up a copy of *The Owl* on the way home and was just crossing the road back to my apartment when a patrol car drew up beside me and the driver rolled down his window. It was Officer "Spike" Stoker of SpecOps-17--the Vampire and Werewolf Disposal Operation, or Suckers and Biters as they preferred to call themselves. I helped him out once on a vampire stakeout; dealing with the undead is not a huge barrel of fun, but I liked Spike a great deal.

"Hey, Thursday, word is you lipped Flanker."

"Good news travels fast, doesn't it? But he got the last laugh--I'm suspended."

He switched off the engine and thought about this for a moment.

"If the shit hits the fan I can offer you some freelance staking for cash at Suckers and Biters; the minimum entry requirements have been reduced to 'anyone mad enough to join me.'"

I sighed.

"Sorry, Spike. I can't. Not right now. I've got husband troubles."

"You're married? When?"

"Exactly," I said, showing him my empty ring finger. "Someone eradicated my husband."

Spike hit the steering wheel with the flat of his hand.

"Bastards. I'm sorry to hear that, but listen, it's not the end of the world. A few years back my uncle Bart was eradicated. Someone goofed and left some memories of him with my aunt. She lodged an

appeal and had him reactualized a year later. Thing is, I never knew I had an uncle after he left, and never knew he had gone when he came back--I've only my aunt's word that it ever happened at all. Does any of this make any sense to you?"

"Twenty-four hours ago it would have sounded insane. Right now it seems--stop that, Pickwick!--as clear as day."

"Hmm," murmured Spike. "You'll get him back, don't worry. Listen: I wish they'd sideslip all this vampire and werewolf crap so I could go and work at Somme WorldTM or something."

I leaned against his car, SpecOps gossip a welcome distraction.

"Got a new partner yet?" I asked him.

"For this shit? You must be kidding. But there is *some* good news. Look at this."

He pulled a photo from his breast pocket. It was of himself standing next to a petite blond girl who barely came up to his elbow.

"Her name's Cindy," he murmured affectionately. "A cracker-- and smart, too."

"I wish you both the best. How does she feel about all this vampire and werewolf stuff?"

"Oh, she's *fine* with all that--or at least she will be, when I tell her." His face fell. "Oh, craps. How can I tell her that I thrust sharpened stakes through the undead and hunt down werewolves like some sort of dogcatcher?" He stopped and sighed, then asked, in a brighter tone, "You're a woman, aren't you?"

"Last time I looked."

"Well, can't you figure out some sort of a--I don't know-- strategy for me? I'd hate to lose this one as well."

"How long do they last when you tell them?"

"Oh, they're usually peachy about it," said Spike, laughing. "They hang about for, well, five, six, maybe more--"

"Weeks?" I asked. "Months?"

"Seconds," replied Spike mournfully, "and those were the ones that *really* liked me."

He sighed deeply.

"I think you should tell her the truth. Girls don't like being lied to--unless it's about surprise holidays and rings and stuff like that."

"I thought you'd say something like that," replied Spike, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "But the shock--!"

"You don't have to tell her outright. You could always scatter a few copies of *Van Helsing's Gazette* around the house."

"Oh, I get it!" replied Spike, thinking hard. "Sort of build her up to it--stakes and crucifixes in the garage--"

"And you could drop werewolves into the conversation every now and then."

"It's a great plan, Thurs," replied Spike happily. "Hang on."

The wireless had started to report an occurrence of unspeakable nastiness up near Banbury. He started the engine.

"I've got to go. Think about my offer. Always some work if you need it!"

And he was gone in a screech of tires.

I smuggled Pickwick back to my apartment and read the paper--I was glad to see the discovery of *Cardenio* had not yet broken in the press, but I was distracted. I stared out of the window for a moment, trying to formulate some sort of plan to get Landen back. Get into books? I didn't know where to even *begin*. On reflection, that wasn't quite right. It was time to go and visit the closest thing to the Delphic Oracle I would ever know: Granny Next.

Gran was playing Ping-Pong at the SpecOps Twilight Homes when I found her. She was thrashing her opponent, who was at least twenty years her junior--but still about eighty. Nervous nurses looked on, trying to stop her before she fell over and broke a bone or two. Granny Next was old. *Really* old. Her pink skin looked more wrinkled than the most wrinkled prune I had ever seen, and her face and hands were livid with dark liver spots. She was dressed in her usual blue gingham dress and hailed me from the other side of the room as I walked in.

"Ah!" she said. "Thursday! Fancy a game?"

"Don't you think you've played enough today?"

"Nonsense! Grab a paddle and we'll play to the first point."

I picked up a paddle as a ball careened past me.

"Wasn't ready!" I protested as another ball came over the net. I swiped at it and missed.

"Ready is as ready does, Thursday. I'd have thought you knew that more than most!"

I grunted and returned the next ball, which was deftly deflected back to me.

"How are you, Gran?"

"Old," she replied, behaving quite the opposite as she skipped nimbly sideways and whacked the ball towards me with savage backspin. "Old and tired, and I need looking after. The grim reaper is lurking close by--I can almost smell him!"

"Gran!"

She missed my shot and declared, "No ball," before pausing for a moment.

"Do you want to know a secret, young Thursday?" she asked,

leaning on the table.

"Go on then," I replied, taking the opportunity to retrieve some balls.

"I am cursed to eternal life!"

"Perhaps it just *seems* like it, Gran."

"Insolent pup," she replied as she returned my serve. "I didn't attain one hundred and eight years on physical fortitude or a statistical quirk alone. Your point."

I served again and missed her return. She paused for a moment.

"I got mixed up with some oddness in my youth, and the long and short of it is that I can't shuffle off this mortal coil until I have read the ten most boring classics."

I looked into her bright eyes. She wasn't kidding.

"How far have you got?" I replied, returning another ball that flew wide.

"Well, that's the trouble, isn't it?" she replied, serving again. "I read what I think is the dullest book on God's own earth, finish the last page, go to sleep with a smile on my face and wake up the following morning feeling better than ever!"

"Have you tried Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*?" I asked. "Six volumes of boring Spenserian stanza, the only saving grace of which is that he *didn't* write the twelve volumes he had planned."

"Read them all," replied Gran. "And his other poems, too, just in case."

I put down my paddle. The balls kept plinking past me.

"You win, Gran. I need to talk to you."

She reluctantly agreed, and I helped her to her bedroom, a small chintzily decorated cell she darkly referred to as her "departure lounge." It was sparsely furnished; there was a picture of me, Anton, Joffy and my mother alongside a couple of empty frames.

As soon as she was seated I said: "They . . . they sideslipped my husband, Gran."

"When did they take him?" she asked, looking at me over her glasses in the way that grannies do; she never questioned what I said, and I explained everything to her as quickly as I could--except for the bit about the baby.

"Hmm," said Granny Next when I had finished. "They took my husband too--I know how you feel."

"Why did they do it?"

"The same reason they did it to you. Love is a wonderful thing, my dear, but it leaves you wide open for blackmail. Give way to tyranny and others will suffer just as badly as you-- perhaps worse."

"Are you saying I shouldn't try to get Landen back?"

"Not at all; just think carefully before you help them. They don't

care about you or Landen; all they want is Jack Schitt. Is Anton still dead?"

"I'm afraid so."

"What a shame. I hoped to see your brother before I popped myself. Do you know what the worst bit about dying is?"

"Tell me, Gran."

"You never get to see how it all turns out."

"Did you get your husband back, Gran?"

Instead of answering she unexpectedly placed her hand on my midriff and smiled that small and all-knowing smile that grandmothers seem to learn at granny school, along with crochet, January sales battle tactics and wondering what you are doing upstairs.

"June?" she asked.

You never argue with Granny Next, nor seek to know how she knows such things.

"July. But Gran, I don't know if it's Landen's, or Miles Hawke's, or whose!"

"You should call this Hawke fellow and ask him."

"I can't do that!"

"Worry yourself woolly then," she retorted. "Mind you, my money is on Landen as the father--as you say, the memories avoided the sideslip, so why not the baby? Believe me, everything will turn out fine. Perhaps not in the way that you imagine, but fine nonetheless."

I wished I could share her optimism. She took her hand off my stomach and lay back on the bed, the energy expended during the Ping-Pong having taken its toll.

"I need to find a way to get back into books without the Prose Portal, Gran."

She opened her eyes and looked at me with a keenness that belied her old age.

"Humph!" she said, then added: "I was SpecOps for seventy-seven years in eighteen different departments. I jumped backwards and forwards and even sideways on occasion. I've chased bad guys who make Hades look like St. Zvlkx and saved the world from annihilation eight times. I've seen such weird shit you can't even *begin* to comprehend, but for all of that I have *absolutely no idea* how Mycroft managed to jump you into *Jane Eyre*."

"Ah."

"Sorry, Thursday--but that's the way it is. If I were you I'd work the problem out *backwards*. Who was the last person you met who could bookjump?"

"Mrs. Nakajima."

"And how did she manage it?"

"She just read herself in, I suppose."

"Have you tried it?"

I shook my head.

"Perhaps you should," she replied with deadly seriousness. "The first time you went into *Jane Eyre*--wasn't that a bookjump?"

"I guess."

"Perhaps," she said as she picked a book at random off the shelf above her bed and tossed it across to me, "you had better *try*."

I picked the book up.

"*The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies*?"

"Well, you've got to start somewhere, haven't you?" replied Gran with a chuckle. I helped her take off her blue gingham shoes and made her more comfortable.

"One hundred and eight!" she muttered. "I feel like the bunny in that Fusioncell ad, you know, the one that has to run on brand X?"

"You're Fusioncell all the way to me, Gran."

She gave a faint smile and leaned back on the pillows.

"Read the book to me, my dear."

I sat down and opened the small Beatrix Potter volume. I glanced up at Gran, who had closed her eyes.

"Read!"

So I did, right from the front to the back.

"Anything?"

"No," I replied sadly, "nothing."

"Not even the whiff of garden refuse or the distant buzz of a lawn mower?"

"Not a thing."

"Hah!" said Gran. "Read it to me again."

So I read it again, and again after that.

"Still nothing?"

"No, Gran," I replied, beginning to get bored.

"How do you see the character of Mrs. Tittlemouse?"

"Resourceful and intelligent," I replied. "Probably a gossip and likes to name-drop. Leagues ahead of Benjamin in the brain department."

"How do you figure that?" queried Gran.

"Well, by allowing his children to sleep so vulnerably in the open air, Benjamin clearly shows minimal parenting skills, yet he has enough *self*-preservation to cover his own face. It was Flopsy who had to come and look for him, as this sort of thing has obviously happened before--it is clear that Benjamin can't be trusted with the children. Once again the mother has to show restraint and wisdom."

"Maybe so," replied Gran, "but where's the wisdom in watching from the window while Mr. and Mrs. McGregor discovered they had been duped with the rotten vegetables?"

She had a point.

"A narrative necessity," I declared. "I think there is more high drama if you follow the outcome of the rabbit's subterfuge, don't you? I think Flopsy, had she been making all the decisions, would have just returned to the burrow but was, on this occasion, overruled by Beatrix Potter."

"It's an interesting theory," commented Gran, stretching her toes out on the counterpane and wriggling them to keep the circulation going. "Mr. McGregor's a nasty piece of work, isn't he? Quite the Darth Vader of children's literature."

"Misunderstood," I told her. "I see *Mrs.* McGregor as the villain of the piece. A sort of Lady Macbeth. His labored counting and inane chuckling might indicate a certain degree of dementia that allows him to be easily dominated by Mrs. McGregor's more aggressive personality. I think their marriage is in trouble, too. She describes him as a 'silly old man' and 'a doddering old fool' and claims the rotten vegetables in the sack are just a pointless prank to annoy her."

"Anything else?"

"Not really. I think that's about it. Good stuff, isn't it?"

But Gran didn't answer; she just chuckled softly to herself.

"So you're still here then," she asked, "you didn't jump into Mr. and Mrs. McGregor's cottage?"

"No."

"In that case," began Gran with a mischievous air, "how did you know she called him a 'doddering old fool'?"

"It's in the text."

"Better check, young Thursday."

I flicked to the correct page and found, indeed, that Mrs. McGregor had said no such thing.

"How odd!" I said. "I must have made it up."

"Maybe," replied Gran, "or perhaps you *overheard* it. Close your eyes and describe the kitchen in Mr. McGregor's cottage."

"Lilac-washed walls," I muttered, "a large range with a kettle singing merrily above a coal fire. There is a dresser against one wall with floral-patterned crocks upon it and atop the scrubbed kitchen table there is a jug with flowers--"

I lapsed into silence.

"And how would you have known that," asked Gran triumphantly, "*unless you had actually been there?*"

I quickly skimmed the book, surprised and impressed by the tantalizing glimmer of another world beyond the attractive watercolors and simple prose. I concentrated hard but nothing similar happened. Perhaps I wanted it too much; I don't know. After the tenth reading I was just looking at the words and ink and nothing else.

"It's a start," said Gran encouragingly. "Try another book when you get home, but don't expect too much too soon--and I'd strongly recommend you go and look for Mrs. Nakajima. Where does she live?"

"She took retirement in *Jane Eyre*."

"*Before* that?"

"Osaka."

"Then perhaps you should seek her there--and for heaven's sake, relax!"

I told her I would, kissed her on the forehead and quietly left the room.



## 12.

### At Home with My Memories

ToadNewsNetwork was the top news station, Lydia Startright their top reporter. If there was a top event, you could bet your top dollar that Toad would make it their top story. When Tunbridge Wells was given to the Russians as war reparations there was no topper story--except, that is, the mammoth migrations, speculation on Bonzo the Wonder Hound's next movie or whether Lola Vavoom shaved her armpits or not. My father said that it was a delightfully odd--and dangerously self-destructive--quirk of humans that we were far more interested in pointless trivia than in genuine news stories.

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*A Life in SpecOps*

SINCE I WAS STILL on official leave pending the outcome of the SO-1 hearing, I went home and let myself into my apartment, kicked off my shoes and poured some pistachios into Pickwick's dish. I made some coffee and called Bowden for a long chat, trying to find out what else had changed since Landen's eradication. As it turned out, not much. Anton had still been blamed for the charge of the light armored brigade, I had still lived in London for ten years, still arrived back in Swindon at the same time, still been up at Uffington picnicking the day before. Dad had once said the past has an astonishing resilience to change; he wasn't kidding. I thanked Bowden, hung up and painted for a while, trying to relax. When that failed I went up for a walk at Uffington, joining the sightseers who had gathered to watch the smashed Hispano-Suiza being loaded onto a trailer. The Leviathan Airship Company had begun an inquiry and volunteered one of their directors to accept charges of corporate manslaughter. The hapless executive had begun his seven-year term already, thus hoping to avoid an expensive and damaging lawsuit for his company.

I returned home to find a dangerous-looking man was standing on my doorstep. I'd never seen him before but he knew me well enough.

"Next!" he bellowed. "I want three months' rent in advance or I'll throw all your stuff in the skip!"

"In advance?" I replied as I unlocked my door, hoping to sneak inside and close it as soon as possible. "You can't do that!"

"I *can*," he said holding up a dog-eared lease agreement. "Pets are strictly against the terms of the lease. Clause 7 subsection B, under 'Pets--special conditions.' Now pay up."

"There's no pet in here," I explained innocently.

"What's that, then?"

Pickwick had made a quiet *plock-plock* noise and poked her head round the door to see what was going on. It was a badly timed move.

"Oh *that*. I'm looking after her for a friend."

My landlord's eyes suddenly lit up as he looked closer at Pickwick, who shrank back nervously. She was a rare Version 1.2 and my landlord seemed to know this.

He eyed Pickwick greedily. "Hand over the dodo," he said, "and I'll give you four months' free rent."

"She's not for trade," I said firmly. I could feel Pickwick quivering behind me.

"Ah," said my landlord. "Then you have two days to pay all your bills or you're out on your sweet little SpecOps arse. Capishe?"

"You say the nicest things."

He glared at me, handed me a bill and disappeared off down the corridor to harass someone else.

I didn't have three months' advance rent, and he knew it. After a search I eventually found a lease agreement, and he was right--the clause was there in case of something much bigger and more dangerous, such as a saber-tooth, but he was within his rights. My cards had reached their limit and my overdraft was nearly full. SpecOps wages were just about enough to keep you fed and a roof over your head, but buying the Speedster had all but cleared me out and I hadn't even *seen* the garage repair bills yet. There was a nervous *plock-plock* from the kitchen.

"I'd sooner sell myself," I told Pickwick, who was standing expectantly with collar and lead in her beak.

I stashed the bank statements back into the shoebox, fixed myself some supper and then flopped in front of the telly, switching to ToadNewsNetwork.

"--the czar's chief negotiator has accepted the foreign minister's offer of Tunbridge Wells as war reparations," intoned the anchorman gravely. "The small town and two-thousand-acre environs would become a Russian-owned enclave named Botchkamos Istochnik within England and all citizens of the new Russian colony would be offered dual nationality. On the spot for TNN is Lydia Startright. Lydia, how are things down there?"

The screen changed to ToadNewsNetwork's preeminent reporter in the main street of Tunbridge Wells.

"There is a mixture of disbelief and astonishment amongst the residents of this sleepy Kent town," responded Startright soberly, surrounded by an assortment of retired gentlefolk carrying shopping and looking vaguely bemused. "Panic warm-clothing shopping has given way to anger that the foreign secretary could make such a decision without mentioning some sort of generous compensation

package. I have with me retired cavalry officer Colonel Prongg. Tell me, Colonel, what is your reaction to the news that you might be Colonel Pronski this time next month?"

"Well," said the colonel in an aggrieved tone, "I would like to say that I am disgusted and appalled at the decision. Appalled and disgusted in the strongest possible terms. I didn't fight the Russkies for forty years only to become one in my retirement. Myself and Mrs. Prongg will be moving, obviously!"

"Since Imperial Russia is the second-wealthiest nation on the planet," replied Lydia, "Tunbridge Wells may find itself, like the island of Fetlar, to be an important offshore banking institution for Russia's wealthy nobility."

"Obviously," replied the colonel, thinking hard, "I would have to wait to see how things went before coming to any final decision. But if the takeover means colder winters, we'll move back to Brighton. Chilblains, y'know."

"There you have it, Carl. This is Lydia Startright reporting for ToadNewsNetwork, Tunbridge Wells."

The camera switched back to the studio.

"Trouble at Mole TV," continued the anchorman, "and a bitter blow for the producers of *Surviving Cortes*, the channel's popular Aztec conquering reenactment series when, instead of being simply voted out of the sealed set of Tenochtitlan, a contestant was sacrificed live to the Sun God. The show has been canceled and an inquiry has been launched. MoleTV were said to be 'sorry and dismayed about the incident' but pointed out that the show was 'the highest-rated on TV, even *after* the blood sacrifice.' Brett?"

The camera switched to the other newsreader.

"Thank you, Carl. Henry, a two-and-a-half-ton male juvenile from the Kirkbride herd, was the first mammoth to reach the winter pastures of Redruth at 6:07 p.m. this evening. Clarence Oldspot was there. Clarence?"

The scene changed to a field in Cornwall where a bored-looking mammoth had almost vanished inside a scrum of TV news reporters and crowds of well-wishers. Clarence Oldspot was still wearing his flak jacket and looked bitterly disappointed that he was reporting on hairy once extinct herbivores and not at the Crimean front line.

"Thank you, Brett. Well, the migration season is truly upon us, and Henry, a two-hundred-to-one outsider, wrongfooted the bookies when--"

I flicked the channel. It was *Name That Fruit!*, the nauseating quiz show. I flicked again to a documentary about the Whig political party's links to Radical Baconian groups in the seven-ties. I switched through several other channels before returning to the

ToadNewsNetwork.

The phone rang and I picked it up.

"It's Miles," said a voice that sounded like one hundred push-ups in under three minutes.

"Who?"

"Miles."

"Ah!" I said in shock. Miles. Miles Hawke, the owner of the boxer shorts and the tasteless sports jacket.

"Thursday? You okay?"

"Me? Fine. Fine. Completely fine. Couldn't be finer. Finer than a-- How are *you*?"

"Do you want me to come round? You sound kinda odd."

"No!" I answered a little too sharply. "I mean, no, thanks--I mean, we saw each other only--um--"

"Two weeks ago?"

"Yes. And I'm very busy. God how busy I am. Never been busier. That's me. Busy as a busy thing--"

"I heard you went up against Flanker. I was concerned."

"Tell me, did you and I ever--"

I couldn't say it but I needed to know.

"Did you and I ever what?"

"Did you and I--"

Think, think.

"Did you and I ever . . . visit the mammoth migrations?"

Damn and blast!

"The migrations? No. Should we have? Thursday, are you *sure* you're okay?"

I started to panic--and that was daft, given the circumstances. When facing people like Hades I didn't panic at all.

"Yes--I mean no. Oops, there's the doorbell. Must be my cab."

"A cab? What happened to your car?"

"A pizza. A cab *delivering* a pizza. Got to go!"

And before he could protest I had put the phone down.

I slapped my forehead with the palm of my hand and muttered:

"Idiot . . . idiot . . . *idiot!*"

I then ran around the flat like a lunatic, closing all the curtains and switching off the lights in case Miles decided to pop round to see me. I sat in the dark listening to Pickwick walking into the furniture for a bit before deciding I was being a twit and elected to go to bed with a copy of *Robinson Crusoe*.

I fetched a flashlight from the kitchen, undressed in the dark and climbed into bed, rolled around a bit on the unfamiliar mattress and then started to read the book, somehow hoping to repeat the sort of semisuccess I had enjoyed with *The Flopsy Bunnies*. I read of Crusoe's

shipwreck and his arrival on the island and skipped the dull religious philosophizing. I stopped for a moment and looked around my bedroom to see whether anything was happening. It wasn't; the only changes in the room were the lights of cars sweeping around my bedroom as they turned out of the road opposite. I heard Pickwick plock-plocking to herself, and returned to my book. I was more tired than I thought and as I read, I lapsed into slumber.

I dreamt I was on an island somewhere, hot and dry, the palms languid in the slight breeze, the sky a deep blue, the sunlight pure and clear. I trod barefoot in the surf, the water cooling my feet as I walked. There was a wrecked ship, all broken masts and tangled rigging, resting on the reef a hundred yards from the shore. As I watched I could see a naked man climb aboard the ship, rummage on the deck, pull on a pair of trousers and disappear below. After waiting a moment or two and not seeing him again I walked further along the beach, where I found Landen sitting under a palm tree gazing at me with a smile on his face.

"What are you looking at?" I asked him, returning his smile and raising my hand to shield my eyes from the sun.

"I'd forgotten how beautiful you are."

"Oh *stop!*"

"I'm not kidding," he replied as he jumped to his feet and hugged me tightly. "I'm really missing you."

"I'm missing you, too," I told him, "but where are you?"

"I'm not exactly sure," he replied with a confused look. "Strictly speaking I don't think I'm anywhere--just here, alive in your memories."

"This is my memory? What's it like?"

"Well," replied Landen, "there are some really *outstanding* parts but some pretty dreadful ones too--in that respect it's a little like Majorca. Would you care for some tea?"

I looked around for the tea but Landen simply smiled.

"I've not been here long but I've learnt a trick or two. Remember that place in Winchester where we had scones that were fresh warm from the oven? You remember, on the second floor, when it was raining outside and the man with the umbrella--"

"Darjeeling or Assam?" asked the waitress.

"Darjeeling," I replied, "and two cream teas. Strawberry for me and quince for my friend."

The island had gone. In its place was the tearoom in Winchester. The waitress scribbled a note, smiled and departed. The rooms were packed with amiable-looking middle-aged couples dressed in tweed. It was, not surprisingly, just as I remembered it.

"That was a neat trick!" I exclaimed.

"Naught to do with me!" replied Landen grinning. "This is all yours. Every last bit of it. The smells, the sounds-- *everything*."

I looked around in silent wonderment.

"I can remember all this?"

"Not *quite*, Thurs. Look at our fellow tea drinkers again."

I turned in my chair and scanned the room. All the couples were more or less identical. Each was a middle-aged couple dressed in tweed and twittering in a home counties twang. They weren't really eating or talking coherently; they were just moving and mumbling to give the *impression* of a packed tearoom.

"Fascinating, isn't it?" said Landen excitedly. "Since you can't actually remember anything about who was here, your mind has just filled in the room with an amalgam of who you might *expect* to see in a teashop in Winchester. Mnemonic wallpaper, so to speak. There is nothing in this room that won't be familiar. The cutlery is your mother's and the pictures on the walls are all odd mixes of the ones we had up in the house. The waitress is a compound of Lottie from your lunch with Bowden and the woman in the chip shop. Every blank space in your memory has been filled with something that you *do* remember--a sort of shuffling of facts to fill in the gaps."

I looked back at our fellow tea-takers, who now seemed faceless.

I had a sudden--and worrying--thought.

"Landen, you haven't been around my late teenage years, have you?"

"Of course not. That's like opening private mail."

I was glad of this. My wholly unlikely infatuation for a boy named Darren and my clumsy introduction to being a woman in the back of a stolen Morris 8 was not something I wanted Landen to witness in all its ignominious glory. For once I was kind of wishing I had a bad memory--or that Uncle Mycroft had perfected his memory erasure device.

Landen poured the tea and asked: "How are things in the real world?"

"I have to figure out a way into books," I told him. "I'm going to take the Gravitube to Osaka tomorrow and see if I can track down anyone who knew Mrs. Nakajima. It's a long shot, but who knows."

"Take care won't y--"

Landen stopped short as something over my shoulder caught his eye. I turned to see probably the last person I wanted to be there. I quickly stood up, knocked my chair over backwards with a clatter and aimed my automatic at the tall figure who had just entered the tearoom.

"No call for *that*!" grinned Acheron Hades. "The way to kill me here is to forget about me, and there is about as much chance of doing that as forgetting little hubbles here."

I looked at Landen, who rolled his eyes heavenward.

"Sorry, Thurs. I meant to tell you about *him*. He's quite alive here in your memories--but harmless, I assure you."

Hades told the couple next to us to scram if they knew what was good for them and then sat down, tucking into their unfinished seed cake. He was exactly as I last saw him on the roof at Thornfield--his clothes were even smoking slightly. I could smell the dry heat of the blaze at Rochester's old house, almost hear the crackle of the fire and the unearthly scream of Bertha as Hades threw her to her death. Hades smiled a supercilious grin. He was relatively safe in my memories, and he knew it-- the worst I could do was to wake up.

I reholstered my gun.

"Hello, Hades," I said, sitting back down again. "Tea?"

"Would you? Frightfully kind."

I poured him a cup. He stirred in four sugars and observed Landen for a bit with an inquisitorial eye before asking: "So you're Parke-Laine, eh?"

"What's left of him."

"And you and Next are in love?"

"Yes."

I took Landen's hand as though to reinforce the statement.

"I was in love once, you know," murmured Hades with a sad and distant smile. "I was quite besotted, in my own sort of way. We used to plan heinous deeds together, and for our first anniversary we set fire to a large public building. We then sat on a nearby hill together to watch the fire light up the sky, the screams of the terrified citizens a symphony to our ears."

He sighed again, only this time more deeply.

"But it didn't work out. The course of true love rarely runs smooth. I had to kill her."

"You *had* to kill her?"

"Yes," he sighed, "but I spared her any pain--and said I was sorry."

"That's a very heartwarming story," murmured Landen.

"You and I have something in common, Mr. Parke-Laine."

"I sincerely hope not."

"We live only in Thursday's memories. She'll never be rid of me until she dies, and the same goes for you--sort of ironic, isn't it? The man she loves, the man she hates--!"

"He'll be returning," I replied confidently, "when Jack Schitt is out of 'The Raven.' "

Acheron laughed.

"I think you overestimate Goliath's commitment to their promises. Landen is as dead as I am, perhaps more so--at least I survived childhood."

"I beat you fair and square, Hades," I said, handing him a jam pot and a knife as he helped himself to a scone, "and I'll take on Goliath and win, too."

"We'll see," replied Acheron thoughtfully, "we'll see."

I thought of the Skyrail and the falling Hispano-Suiza.

"Did you try and kill me the other day, Hades?"

"If only!" he answered, waving the jam spoon in our direction and laughing. "But then again I *might* have done--after all, I'm here only as your *memory* of me. I sincerely hope that I am, perhaps, not dead and out there somewhere for real, plotting, plotting . . . !"

Landen stood up.

"C'mon, Thurs. Let's leave this clown to our scones. Do you remember when we first kissed?"

The tearoom was suddenly gone and in its place was a warm night in the Crimea. We were back at Camp Aardvark watching the shelling of Sevastopol on the horizon, the finest fireworks show on the planet if only you could forget what it was doing. The sound of the barrage was softened almost into a lullaby by the distance. We were both in battle dress and standing together but not touching--and by God how much we wanted to.

"Where's this?" asked Landen.

"It's where we kissed for the first time," I replied.

"No--!" replied Landen. "I remember watching the shelling with you, but we only *talked* that evening. I didn't actually kiss you until the night you drove me out to forward CP and we got stuck in the minefield."

I laughed out loud.

"Men have such crap memories when it comes to things like this! We were standing apart like this and desperately wanting to just *touch* each other. You put your hand on my shoulder to pretend to point something out and I slid my hand into the small of your back like . . . so. We didn't say anything but when we held each other it was like, like *electricity*!"

We did. It was. The shivers went all the way to my feet, bounced back, returned in a spiral up my body and exited my neck as a light sweat.

"Well," replied Landen in a quiet voice a few minutes later. "I think I prefer *your* version. So if we kissed *here*, then the night in the minefield was--"

"Yes," I told him, "yes, yes it was."

And there we were, sitting outside an armored personnel carrier in the dead of night two weeks later, marooned in the middle of probably the best-signposted minefield in the area.

"People will think you did this on purpose," I told him as unseen



bombers droned overheard, off on a mission to bomb someone to pulp.

"I got away only with a reprimand, as I recall," he replied. "And anyway, who's to say that I didn't?"

"You drove *deliberately* into a minefield just for a legover?" I asked, laughing.

"Not any old legover," he replied. "Besides, there was no risk involved."

He pulled a hastily drawn map out of his battle-dress pocket.

"Captain Bird drew this for me."

"You scheming little shitbag!" I told him, throwing an empty K-ration tin at him. "I was terrified!"

"Ah!" replied Landen with a grin. "So it was terror and not passion that drove you into my arms?"

"Well"--I shrugged--"maybe a bit of both."

Landen leaned forward, but I had a thought and pressed a fingertip to his mouth.

"But this wasn't the *best*, was it?"

He stopped, smiled and whispered in my ear: "At the furniture store?"

"In your dreams, Land. I'll give you a clue. You still had a leg and we both had a week's leave--by lucky coincidence at the same time."

"No coincidence," said Landen with a smile.

"Captain Bird again?"

"Two hundred bars of chocolate but worth every packet."

"You're a bit of a rake, y'know, Land--but in the nicest kind of way. Anyhow," I continued, "we elected to go cycling in the Republic of Wales."

As I spoke the APC vanished, the night rolled back and we were walking hand in hand through a small wood to the side of a stream. It was summer and the water babbled excitedly among the rocks, the springy moss a warm carpet to our bare feet. The blue sky was devoid of clouds and the sunlight trickled in amongst the verdant foliage above our heads. We pushed aside low branches and followed the sound of a waterfall. We came across two bicycles leaning up against a tree, the panniers open and the tent half pegged out on the ground. My heart quickened as the memories of that particular summer's day flooded back. We had started to put the tent up but stopped for a moment, the passion overcoming us. I squeezed Landen's hand and he curled his hands round my waist. He smiled at me with his funny half-smile.

"When I was alive I came to this memory a lot," he confided to me. "It's one of my favorites, and amazingly, your memory seems to have got most things correct."

"Is that a fact?" I asked him as he kissed me gently on my neck. I shivered slightly and ran my fingers down his naked back.

"Most--*plock*--definitely."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing--*plock plock*--why?"

"Oh *no*! Not now of all times!"

"What?" asked Landen.

"I think I'm about to--"

"--wake up."

But I was talking to myself. I was back in my bedroom in Swindon, my memory excursion annoyingly cut short by Pickwick, who was staring at me from the rug, leash in beak and making quiet plock-plock noises. I gave her a baleful stare.

"Pickers, you are *such* a pest. Just when I was getting to the good bit."

She stared at me, little comprehending what she had done.

"I'm going to drop you round at Mum's," I told her as I sat up and stretched. "I'm going to Osaka for a couple of days."

She cocked her head on one side and stared at me curiously.

"You and Junior will be in good hands, I promise."

I got out of bed and trod on something hard and whiskery. I looked at the object and smiled to myself. It was a good sign. Lying on the carpet was an old coconut husk--and better than that, there was still some sand stuck to my feet. My reading of *Robinson Crusoe* hadn't been a total failure after all.

## 14.

### The Gravitube™

By the time this decade is out, we aim to construct a transport system that can take a man or a woman from New York to Tokyo and back again in two *hours*. . . .

--U.S. PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY

For mass transport over the globe there were primarily the railroads and the airship. Rail was fast and convenient but stopped short of crossing the oceans. Airships could cover greater distances--but were slow and fraught with delays due to weather. In the fifties the journey time to Australia or New Zealand was typically ten days. In 1960, a new form of transportation system was begun-- the Gravitube. It promised delay-free travel to anywhere on the planet. Any destination, whether Auckland, Rome or Los Angeles, would take exactly the same: a little over forty minutes. It was, quite possibly, the greatest feat of engineering that mankind would ever undertake.

VINCENT DOTT,

*The Gravitube: Tenth Wonder of the World*

PICKWICK INSISTED on sitting on her egg all the way to Mum's house and plocked nervously whenever I went over twenty miles per hour. I made her a nest in the airing cupboard and left her fussing over her egg while the other dodos strained at the window, trying to figure out what was going on. I rang Bowden while Mum fixed me a sandwich.

"Are you okay?" he inquired. "Your phone's been off the hook!"

"I'm okay, Bowd. What's happening at the office?"

"The news is out."

"About Landen?"

"About *Cardenio*. Someone blabbed to the press. Vole Towers is besieged by news channels as we speak. Lord Volescamper has been yelling at Victor about one of us talking."

"Wasn't me."

"Nor me. Volescamper has turned down fifty million quid for it already--every impresario on the planet wants to buy the rights for first performance. And get this--you've been cleared by SO-1 of any wrongdoing. They thought that since Kaylieu was shot by SO-14 marksmen yesterday morning you might have been right after all."

"Big of them. Does this mean my leave is over?"

"Victor wants to see you as soon as possible."

"Tell him I'm ill, would you? I have to go to Osaka."

"Why?"

"Best not to know. I'll call you."

I replaced the receiver and Mum gave me some cheese on toast and a cup of tea. She sat down at the other side of the table and flicked

through a well-thumbed copy of last month's *FeMole*--the one with me in it.

"Any news from Mycroft and Polly, Mum?"

"I got a card from London saying they were fit and well," she replied, "but they said they needed a jar of piccalilli and a torque wrench. I left them in Mycroft's study and they'd vanished by the afternoon."

"Mum?"

"Yes?"

"How often do you see Dad?"

She smiled. "Most mornings. He drops by to say hello. Sometimes I even make him a packed lunch--"

She was interrupted by a roar that sounded like a thousand tubas in unison. The sound reverberated through the house and set the teacups in the corner cupboard rattling.

"Oh Lordy!" she exclaimed. "Not mammoths *again!*" And was out of the door in a flash.

And a mammoth it was, in name and stature. Covered with thick brown hair and as big as a tank, it had walked through the garden wall and now sniffed suspiciously at the wisteria.

"Get away from there!" yelled my mother, searching around for a weapon of some sort. Wisely, the dodos had all run away and hid behind the potting shed. Rejecting the wisteria, the mammoth delicately scraped through the vegetable patch with a long curved tusk and then picked the vegetables up with its trunk, stuffed them into its mouth and munched slowly and deliberately. My mother was wide-eyed and almost apoplectic with rage.

"Second time this has happened!" she yelled defiantly. "Get off my hydrangeas, you . . . you . . . *thing!*" The mammoth ignored her, sucked up the entire contents of the ornamental pond in one go and clumsily trampled the garden furniture to matchwood.

"A weapon," announced my mother. "I need a weapon. I've sweated blood over this garden and no reactivated herbivore is going to have it for dinner!"

She disappeared into the shed and reappeared a moment later brandishing a yard broom. But the mammoth had little to fear, even from my mother. It did, after all, weigh almost five tons. It was used to doing *exactly* what it pleased. The only good news about the invasion was that it wasn't the whole herd.

"Giddout!" yelled my mother, raising the broom to whack the mammoth on the hindquarters.

"Hold it right there!" said a loud voice. We turned. A man dressed in a safari suit had hopped over the wall and was running towards us.

"Agent Durrell, SO-13," he announced breathlessly, showing my

mother an ID. "Spank the mammoth and you're under arrest."

My mother's fury switched to the SpecOps agent.

"So he eats my garden and I'm supposed to do *nothing*?"

"*Her* name is Buttercup," corrected Durrell. "The rest of the herd went to the west of Swindon as planned, but Buttercup here is a bit of a dreamer. And yes, you do *nothing*. Mammoths are a protected species."

"Well!" said my mother indignantly. "If you did your job properly then ordinary law-abiding citizens like me would still have gardens!"

The once verdant garden looked as though it had been the target of an artillery bombardment. Buttercup, her voluminous tum now full of Mum's vegetable patch, stepped over the wall and scratched herself against an iron streetlamp, snapping it like a twig. The lamp standard dropped heavily on the roof of a car and popped the windscreen. Buttercup let out another almighty trumpeting, which set off a few car alarms, and in the distance there was an answer. She stopped, listened for a bit and then happily lumbered off down the road.

"I've got to go!" said Durrell, handing Mum a card. "Compensation can be claimed if you call this number. You might like to ask for our free leaflet 'How to Make Your Garden Less Palatable to Proboscidea.' Good morning!"

He tipped his hat and jumped over the wall to where his partner had pulled up in an SO-13 Land Rover. Buttercup gave out another call and the Land Rover screeched off, leaving my mother and me staring at her wrecked garden. The dodos, sensing the danger had passed, crept out from behind the potting shed and plock-plocked quietly to themselves as they pecked and scratched at the scoured earth.

"Perhaps it's time for a Japanese garden," sighed my mother, throwing down the broom handle. "Reverse engineering! Where will it all end? They say there's a *Diatryma* living wild in the New Forest!"

"Urban legend," I assured her as she started to tidy up the garden. I looked at my watch. I would have to run if I was to get to Osaka that evening.

I took the train to the busy Saknussum International Gravitube Terminus, located just to the west of London. I made my way into the departures terminal and studied the board. The next DeepDrop to Sydney would be in an hour. I bought a ticket, hurried to the check-in and spent ten minutes listening to a litany of pointless antiterrorist questions.

"I don't have a bag," I explained. She looked at me oddly, so I added: "Well, I *did*, but you lost it the last time I traveled. In fact, I don't think I've *ever* had a bag returned to me after tubing."

She thought about this for a moment and then said: "*If* you had a bag and *if* you had packed it yourself, and *if* you had not left it unattended, might it contain any of the following?"

She showed me a list of prohibited items and I shook my head.

"Would you like an in-drop meal?"

"What are my choices?"

"Yes or no."

"No."

She looked at the next question on her sheet.

"Who would you prefer to sit next to?"

"Nun or a knitting granny, if that's possible."

"Hmm," mused the check-in girl, studying the passenger manifest carefully. "All the nuns, grannies and intelligent nonamorous males are taken. It's technobore, lawyer, self-pitying drunk or copiously vomiting baby, I'm afraid."

"Technobore and lawyer, then."

She marked me down on the seating plan and then announced: "There will be slight delay in receiving the excuse for the lateness of the DeepDrop to Sydney, Miss Next. The reason for the delay in the excuse has yet to be established."

Another check-in girl whispered something in her ear.

"I've just been informed that the reason for the excuse for the delay has been delayed itself. As soon as we find out why the reason for the excuse has been delayed we will tell you--in line with government guidelines. If you are at all unhappy with the speed at which the excuse has been delivered, you might be eligible for a 1% refund. Have a nice drop."

I was handed my boarding card and told to go to the gate when the drop was announced. I thanked her, bought some coffee and biscuits and sat down to wait. The Gravitube seemed to be plagued with delays. There were a lot of travelers sitting around looking bored as they waited for their trip. In theory every drop took under an hour irrespective of destination; but even if they developed a twenty-minute accelerated DeepDrop to the other side of the planet, you'd still spend four hours at either end waiting for baggage or customs or something.

The PA barked into life again.

"Attention, please. Passengers for the 11:04 DeepDrop to Sydney will be glad to know that the delay was due to too many excuses being created by the Gravitube's Excuse Manufacturing Facility. Consequently we are happy to announce that since the excess excuses have now been used, the 11:04 DeepDrop to Sydney is ready for boarding at gate six."

I finished my coffee and made my way with the throng to where the

shuttle was waiting to receive us. I had ridden on the Gravitube several times before, but never the DeepDrop. My recent tour of the world had all been by overmantles, which are more like trains. I carried on through passport control, boarded the shuttle and was shown to my seat by a stewardess whose fixed smile reminded me of a synchronized swimmer's. I sat next to a man with a shock of untidy black hair who was reading a copy of *Astounding Tales*.

"Hello," he said in a subdued monotone. "Ever Deep-Dropped before?"

"Never," I replied.

"Better than any roller coaster," he announced with finality and returned to his magazine.

I strapped myself in as a tall man in a large check suit sat down next to me. He was about forty, had a luxuriant red mustache and wore a carnation in his buttonhole.

"Hello, Thursday!" he said in a friendly voice as he proffered his hand. "Allow me to introduce myself--Akrid Snell."

I stared at him in surprise, and he laughed.

"We needed some time to talk, and I've never been on one of these before. How does it work?"

"The Gravitube? It's a tunnel running through the center of the earth. We freefall all the way to Sydney. But . . . but . . . how on earth did you find me?"

"Jurisdiction has eyes and ears everywhere, Miss Next."

"Plain English, Snell--or I could turn out to be the most difficult client you've ever had."

Snell looked at me with interest for a few moments as a stewardess gave a monotonous safety announcement, culminating with the warning that there were no toilet facilities until gravity returned to 40%.

"You work in SpecOps, don't you?" asked Snell as soon as we were comfortable and all loose possessions had been placed in zippered bags.

I nodded.

"Jurisdiction is the service we run *inside* novels to maintain the integrity of popular fiction. The printed word might look solid to you, but where I come from, 'movable type' has a much deeper meaning."

"The ending of *Jane Eyre*," I murmured, suddenly realizing what all the fuss was about. "I changed it, didn't I?"

"I'm afraid so," agreed Snell, "but don't admit that to anyone but me. It was the biggest Fiction Infraction to a major work since someone futzed so badly with Thackeray's *Giant Despair* we had to delete it completely."

"Drop is D minus two minutes," said the announcer. "Would all

passengers please take their seats, check their straps and make sure all infants are secured."

"So what's happening now?" asked Snell.

"Do you really not know anything about the Gravitube?"

Snell looked around and lowered his voice.

"All of your world is a bit strange to me, Next. I come from a land of trench coats and deep shadows, complex plot lines, frightened witnesses, underground bosses, gangster's molls, seedy bars and startling six-pages-from-the-end denouements."

I must have looked confused, for he lowered his voice further and hissed: "I'm *fictional*, Miss Next. Co-lead in the Perkins & Snell series of crime books. I expect you've read me?"

"I'm afraid not," I admitted.

"Limited print run," sighed Snell, "but we had a good review in *CrimeBooks Digest*. I was described as 'a well rounded and amusing character . . . with quite a few memorable lines.' *The Mole* placed us on their 'Read of the Week' list but *The Toad* were less enthusiastic--but listen, who takes any notice of the critics?"

"You're *fictional*?" I said at last.

"Keep it to yourself though, won't you?" he urged. "Now, about the Gravitube?"

"Well," I replied, gathering my thoughts, "in a few minutes the shuttle will have entered the airlock and depressurization will commence--"

"Depressurization? Why?"

"For a frictionless drop. No air resistance--and we are kept from touching the sides by a powerful magnetic field. We then simply free-fall the eight thousand miles to Sydney."

"So all cities have a DeepDrop to every other city, then?"

"Only London and New York connecting to Sydney and Tokyo. If you wanted to get from Buenos Aires to Auckland, you'd first take the overmantle to Miami, then to New York, DeepDrop to Tokyo, and finally another overmantle to Auckland."

"How fast does it go?" asked Snell, slightly nervously.

"Peaks at fourteen thousand miles per hour," said my neighbor from behind his magazine, "give or take. We'll fall with increasing velocity but *decreasing* acceleration until we reach the center of the earth, at which point we will have attained our maximum velocity. Once past the center our velocity will *decrease* until we reach Sydney, when our velocity will have decreased to zero."

"Is it safe?"

"Of course!" I assured him.

"What if there's another shuttle coming the other way?"

"There can't be," I assured him. "There's only one shuttle per tube."



"What you say is true," said my boring neighbor. "The only thing we have to worry about is a failure of the magnetic containment system that keeps the ceramic tube and us from melting in the liquid core of the earth."

"Don't listen to this, Snell."

"Is that likely?" he asked.

"Never happened before," replied the man somberly, "but then if it had, they wouldn't tell us about it, now would they?"

Snell thought about this for a few moments.

"Drop is D minus ten seconds," said the announcer.

The cabin went quiet and everyone tensed, subconsciously counting down. The drop, when it came, was a bit like going over a very large humpback bridge at a great deal of speed, but the initial unpleasantness--which was accompanied by grunts from the passengers--gave way to the strange and curiously enjoyable feeling of weightlessness. Many people do the drop for this reason only. I turned to Snell.

"You okay?"

He nodded and managed a wan smile.

"It's a bit . . . strange," he said at last, watching as his tie floated in front of him.

"So I'm charged with a Fiction Infraction, yes?"

"Fiction Infraction *Class II*," corrected Snell, swallowing hard. "It's not as though you did it on purpose. Even though we could argue convincingly that you *improved* the narrative of *Jane Eyre*, we still have to prosecute; after all, we can't have people blundering around in *Little Women* trying to stop Beth from dying, can we?"

"Can't you?"

"Of course not. Not that people don't try. When you get before the magistrate, just deny everything and play dumb. I'm trying to get the case postponed on the grounds of *strong reader approval*."

"Will that work?"

"It worked when Falstaff made his illegal jump to *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and proceeded to dominate and alter the story. We thought he'd be sent packing back to *Henry IV*, Part 2. But no, his move was approved. The judge was an opera fan, so maybe that had something to do with it. You haven't had any operas written about you by Verdi or Vaughan Williams, have you?"

"No."

"Pity."

The feeling of weightlessness didn't last long. The increasing deceleration once more gently returned weight to us all. At 40% normal gravity the cabin warning lights went out and we could move around if we wanted.

The technobore on my right started up again.

--but the *real* beauty of the Gravitube is its simplicity," he continued. "Since the force of gravity is the same irrespective of the declination of the tunnel, the trip to Tokyo will take *exactly* the same time as the trip to New York--and it would be the same again to Carlisle if it didn't make more sense to use a conventional railway. Mind you," he went on, "if you could use a wave induction system to keep us accelerating all the way to the surface at the other end, the speed could be well in excess of the seven miles per second needed to achieve escape velocity."

"You'll be telling me that we'll fly to the moon next," I said.

"We already have," returned my technobore neighbor in a conspiratorial whisper. "Secret government experiments have already constructed a base on the far side of the moon where transmitters control our thoughts and actions from atop the Empire State Building using interstellar communications from extraterrestrial life forms intent on world domination with the express agreement of the Goliath Corporation and a secret cabal of world leaders known as *SPORK*."

"And don't tell me," I added, "there's a *Diatryma* living in the New Forest."

"How did you know?"

I ignored him, and only thirty-eight minutes after leaving London we came in for a delicate dock in Sydney, the faintest *click* being heard as the magnetic locks held on to the shuttle to stop it falling back down again. After the safety light had extinguished and the airlock had been pressurized we made our way to the exit, avoiding the technobore, who was trying to tell anyone who would listen that the Goliath Corporation were responsible for smallpox.

Snell, who genuinely seemed to enjoy the DeepDrop, walked with me until baggage retrieval, looked at his watch and announced: "Well, that's me. Thanks for the chat. I've got to go and defend Tess for the umpteenth time. As Hardy originally wrote it she gets off. Listen, try and figure some extenuating circumstances as to your actions. If you can't, then try and think up some stonking great lies. The bigger the better."

"That's your best advice? Perjure myself?"

Snell coughed politely.

"The astute lawyer has many strings to his bow, Miss Next. They've got Mrs. Fairfax and Grace Poole to testify against you. It doesn't look great, but no case is lost until it's lost. They said I couldn't get Henry V off the war crimes rap when he ordered the French POWs murdered, but I managed it--the same as Max de Winter's murder charge. No one figured he'd get off *that* in a million years. By the by, can you give this letter to that gorgeous Flakky girl? I'd be eternally grateful."

He handed me a crumpled letter from his pocket and made to move off.

"Wait!" I said. "Where and when is the hearing?"

"Didn't I say? Sorry. The prosecution has chosen the Examining Magistrate from Kafka's *The Trial*. Not my choice, believe me. Tomorrow at 9:25. Do you speak German?"

"No."

"Then we'll make sure it's an English translation--drop in at the end of Chapter Two; we're on after Herr K. Remember what I said. So long!"

And before I could ask him how I might even *begin* to enter Kafka's masterpiece of frustrating circuitous bureaucracy, he was gone.

I caught the overmantle to Tokyo a half hour later. It was almost deserted, and I hopped on board a Skyrail to Osaka and alighted in the business district at one in the morning, four hours after leaving Saknussum. I took a hotel room and sat up all night, staring out at the blinking lights and thinking about Landen.

## 15.

### Curiouser & Curiouser in Osaka

I first learned of my strange bookjumping skills as a little girl in the English school where my father taught in Osaka. I had been instructed to stand up and read to the class a passage from *Winnie-the-Pooh*. I began with Chapter Nine--"It rained and it rained and it rained . . ."--but then had to stop abruptly as I felt the hundred-acre wood move rapidly in all around me. I snapped the book shut and returned, damp and bewildered, to my classroom. Later on I visited the hundred-acre wood from the safety of my own bedroom and enjoyed wonderful adventures there. But I was always careful, even at that tender age, never to alter the visible story lines. Except, that is, to teach Christopher Robin how to read and write.

O. NAKAJIMA,  
*Adventures in the Book Trade*

OSAKA WAS LESS FLASHY than Tokyo but no less industrious. In the morning I took breakfast at the hotel, bought a copy of the *Far Eastern Toad* and read the home news but from a Far Eastern viewpoint--which makes for a good take on the whole Russian thing. During breakfast I pondered just how I might find one woman in a city of a million. Apart from her surname and perfect English, there was little to go on. As a first step I asked the concierge to photocopy all the Nakajima entries from the telephone directory. I was dismayed to discover that Nakajima was quite a common name--there were 2,729 of them. I called one at random and a very pleasant Mrs. Nakajima spoke to me for about ten minutes. I thanked her profusely and put the phone down, having not understood a single word. I sighed, ordered a large jug of coffee from room service, and began.

It was 351 non-bookjumper Nakajimas later that, tired and annoyed, I started telling myself that what I was doing was useless--if Mrs. Nakajima *had* retired to the distant backstory of *Jane Eyre*, was she really going to be anywhere near a telephone?

I sighed, stretched one of those groany-clicky stretches, drank the rest of my cold coffee and decided to go for a brief stroll to loosen up. I was staring at the photocopied pages as I strolled along, trying to think of something to narrow the search, when a young man's jacket caught my eye.

As is popular in the Far East, many T-shirts and jackets have English writing upon them--some of them making sense, but others just collections of words that must appear as fashionable to the Japanese youth as kanji appear elegant to us. I had seen jackets with the strange

legend 100% *Chevrolet OK Fly-boy* and later one with *Pratt & Whitney squadron movie*, so I should have been ready for anything. But this one was different. It was a smart leather jacket with the following message embroidered on the back:

*Follow me, Next Girl!*

So I did. I followed the young man for two blocks before I noticed a *second* jacket much like the first. By the time I had crossed the canal I had seen another jacket with *SpecOps this way* emblazoned on the back, then *Jane Eyre forever!* followed quickly by *Bad Boy Goliath*. But that wasn't all--like some bizarre homing call, all the people wearing these jackets, hats and T-shirts seemed to be heading *in the same direction*. Thoughts of falling Hispano-Suizas and ambushed Skyrails suddenly filled my head, so I dug the entroposcope from my bag, shook it and noticed a slight separation between the rice and lentils. Entropy was decreasing. I rapidly turned and started walking in the opposite direction. I took three paces and stopped as a daring notion filled my head. Of course--why not make the entropic failure do the work for me? I followed the logos to a nearby market square, where I noticed the rice and lentils in the entroposcope had settled--despite repeated shakings--into curved bands. Coincidence had increased to the point where everyone I saw was wearing something with a relevant logo. *MycroTech Developments*, *Charlotte Bronte*, *Hispano-Suiza*, *Goliath* and *Skyrail* were all sewn or stuck to hats, jackets, umbrellas, shirts, bags. I looked around, desperately trying to find the coincidental epicenter. Then I found it. In an inexplicably vacant gap within the busy market, an old man was seated in front of a small table. He was as brown as a nut and quite bald, and opposite him the other chair had just been vacated by a young woman. A piece of battered card leaning against his small valise declared, in eight languages, the fortune-teller's trade and pledge. The English part of the sign read: "I have the answer you seek!" And I was in no doubt that whatever he said would be so--but, given the unlikely modes of death already meted out by my unseen assailant, probably, yet very *improbably* in its undertaking, would result in my demise. I took two paces closer to the fortune-teller and shook the entroposcope again. The patterns were more defined but not the clean half-and-half separation I needed. The little man had seen me dither and beckoned me closer.

"Please!" he said. "Please come. Tell you *everything!*"

I paused and looked around for any sign of jeopardy. There was nothing. I was in a perfectly peaceful square in a prosperous area of a large city in Japan. Whatever my anonymous foe had in store for me, it was something that I would least expect.

I stayed back, unsure of the wisdom of what I was doing. It was the appearance of a T-shirt that had *nothing* to do with me that clinched it. If I let this opportunity slide I would never find Mrs. Nakajima this side of a month. I took out my ballpoint, clicked it open and marched purposefully towards the small man, who grinned at me.

"You come!" he said in poor English. "You learn everything. Good buy, from me!"

But I didn't stop. As I walked towards the fortune-teller I thrust my hand in my bag and pulled out a sheet of the Nakajima pages at random, then, just as I passed the little nut-brown man, I stabbed arbitrarily on the page with my pen and broke into a run. There was a horrified gasp from the onlookers as a bolt of lightning came to earth in the small square and struck the clearly not very talented fortune-teller with a bright flash. I didn't stop until I was away from that place, back to plain polo shirts, ordinary designer labels and my entroposcope to random clumping. I sat on a bench to get my breath back, felt nauseous again and almost threw up in a nearby trash can, much to the consternation of a little old lady who was sitting next to me. I recovered slightly and looked at the Nakajima that the fall of my ballpoint had decreed. If coincidences were running as high as I had hoped, then this Nakajima *had* to be the one I sought. I turned to ask the little old lady next to me the way, but she had gone. I stopped a passerby and asked for directions. It seemed that a small amount of negative entropy still lingered--I was barely two minutes' walk from my quarry.

The apartment block I was directed to was not in a very good state of repair. The plaster that was covering the cracks had cracks, and the grime on the peeling paint was itself starting to peel. Inside there was a small lobby where an elderly doorman was watching a dubbed version of *65 Walrus Street*. He directed me to the fourth floor, where I found Mrs. Nakajima's apartment at the end of the corridor. The varnish on the door had lost its shine and the brass doorknob was tarnished, dusty and dull; no one had been in here for some time. I knocked despite this, and when silence was all that answered me, grasped the knob and turned it slowly. To my surprise it turned easily and the door creaked open. I paused to look about me, and, seeing no one, pushed open the door and stepped in.

Mrs. Nakajima's apartment was ordinary in the extreme. Three bedrooms, bathroom and kitchen. The walls and ceiling were plainly painted, the flooring a light-colored wood. It seemed as though she had moved out a few months ago and taken almost everything with her. The only notable exception to this was a small table near the window of the living room, upon which I found four slim leather-bound volumes lying next to a brass reading lamp. I picked up the

uppermost book. It had *Jurisdiction* embossed on the cover, above a name I didn't recognize. I tried to open the book, but the covers were stuck fast. I tried the second book with no better luck, but paused for a moment when I saw the third book. I gently touched the slim volume and ran my fingertips across the thin layer of dust that had accumulated on the spine. The hair bristled on my neck and I shivered. But it wasn't a fearful feeling. It was the light tingle of apprehension; this book, I knew, would open. *The name on the cover was my own.* I had been expected. I opened the book. On the title page was a handwritten note from Mrs. Nakajima that was short and to the point:

For Thursday Next, in grateful anticipation of good work and fine times ahead with Jurisdiction. I jackanoried you into a book when you were nine but now you must do it for yourself--and you can, and you shall. I also suggest that you be quick; Mr. Schitt-Hawse is walking along the corridor outside as you read this and he isn't out collecting for ChronoGuard orphans.

Mrs. Nakajima

I ran to the door and slid the bolt just as the door handle rattled. There was a pause and then a loud thump on the door.

"Next!" went Schitt-Hawse's unmistakable voice. "I know you're in there! Let me in and we can fetch Jack together!"

I had been followed, obviously. It suddenly struck me that perhaps Goliath were more interested in how to get into books than in Jack Schitt himself. There was a billion-pound hole in the budget for their advanced weapons division, and a Prose Portal, *any* Prose Portal, would be just the thing to fill it.

"Go to hell!" I shouted as I returned to my book. On the first page, under a large heading that read *READ ME FIRST!*, there was a description of a library somewhere. I needed no second bidding; the door flexed under a heavy blow and I saw the paint crack near the lock. If it were Chalk and Cheese they wouldn't take long to gain entry.

I relaxed, took a deep breath, cleared my throat and read in a clear, strong and confident voice, expressive and expansive. I added pauses and inflections and raised the tone of my voice where the text required it. I read like I had never read before.

"I was in a long, dark, wood-paneled corridor," I began, "lined with bookshelves that reached from the richly carpeted floor to the vaulted ceiling--"

The sound of thumping increased, and as I spoke the doorframe splintered near the hinges and collapsed inwards with Chalk, who fell with a heavy thump onto the floor, closely followed by Cheese, who

landed on top of him.

"The carpet was elegantly patterned with geometric designs and the ceiling was decorated with sculpted reliefs that depicted scenes from the classics--"

"Next!" yelled Schitt-Hawse, putting his head round the door as Chalk and Cheese struggled to get up. "Coming to Osaka was *not* part of the deal! I told you to keep me informed. Nothing will happen to you--"

But something *was* happening. Something new, something *other*. My utter loathing of Goliath, the urge to get away, the knowledge that without entry to books I would never see Landen again--all of these things gave me the will to soften the barriers that had hardened since the day I first entered *Jane Eyre* in 1958.

"--High above me, spaced at regular intervals, were finely decorated circular apertures through which light gained entry--"

I could see Schitt-Hawse move towards me, but he had started to become less tangible; although I could see his lips move, the sound arrived at my ears a full second later. I continued to read, and as I did so the room about me began to *fworp* from view.

"Next!" yelled Schitt-Hawse. "You'll regret this, I swear--!"

I carried on reading.

"--reinforcing the serious mood of the library--" "

"Bitch!" I heard Schitt-Hawse cry. "Grab her--!"

But his words were as a zephyr; the room took on the appearance of morning mist and darkened. I felt a gentle tingling sensation on my skin--and in the next instant, I had gone.

I blinked twice, but Osaka was far behind. I closed the book, carefully placed it in my pocket and looked around. I was in a long, dark, wood-paneled corridor lined with bookshelves that reached from the richly carpeted floor to the vaulted ceiling. The carpet was elegantly patterned with geometric designs and the ceiling was decorated with sculpted reliefs that depicted scenes from the classics, each cornice supporting the marble bust of an author. High above me, spaced at regular intervals, were finely decorated circular apertures through which light gained entry and reflected off the polished wood, reinforcing the serious mood of the library. Running down the center of the corridor was a long row of reading tables, each with a green-shaded brass lamp. The library appeared endless; in both directions the corridor vanished into darkness with no definable end. But this wasn't important. Describing the library would be like going to see a Turner and commenting on the frame. On all of the walls, end after end, shelf after shelf, were *books*. Hundreds, thousands, millions of books. Hardbacks, paperbacks, leather-bound, uncorrected proofs,



handwritten manuscripts, *everything*. I stepped closer and rested my fingertips lightly against the pristine volumes. They felt warm to the touch, so I leaned closer and pressed my ear to the spines. I could hear a distant hum, the rumble of machinery, people talking, traffic, seagulls, laughter, waves on rocks, wind in the winter branches of trees, distant thunder, heavy rain, children playing, a blacksmith's hammer-- a million sounds all happening together. And then, in a revelatory moment, the clouds slid back from my mind and a crystal-clear understanding of the very nature of books shone upon me. They weren't just collections of words arranged neatly on a page to give the *impression* of reality--each of these volumes *was* reality. The similarity of these books to the copies I had read back home was no more than the similarity a photograph has to its subject. These books *were alive!*

I walked slowly down the corridor, running my fingers along the spines and listening to the comfortable pat-pat-pat sound they made, every now and then recognizing a familiar title. After a couple of hundred yards I came across a junction where a second corridor crossed the first. In the middle of the crossways was a large circular void with a wrought-iron rail and a spiral staircase bolted securely to one side. I peered cautiously down. Not more than thirty feet below me I could see another floor, exactly like this one. But in the middle of *that* floor was another circular void through which I could see another floor, and another and another and so on to the depths of the library. I looked up. It was the same above me, more circular light wells and the spiral staircase reaching up into the dizzy heights above. I leaned on the balcony and looked about me at the vast library once again.

"Well," I said to no one in particular, "I don't think I'm in Osaka anymore."

## 16.

### Interview with the Cat

The Cheshire Cat was the first character I met at Jurisfiction, and his sporadic appearances enlivened the time I spent there. He gave me much advice. Some was good, some was bad and some was so nonsensically nonsequitous that it confuses me even now to think about it. And yet, during all that time, I never learnt his age, where he came from or where he went when he vanished. It was one of Jurisfiction's lesser mysteries.

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*The Jurisfiction Chronicles*

**A**VISITOR!" exclaimed a voice behind me. "What a *delightful* surprise!"

I turned and was astonished to see a large and luxuriant tabby cat sitting precariously on the uppermost bookshelf. He was staring at me with a curious mixture of insanity and benevolence and remained quite still except for the tip of his tail, which twitched occasionally from side to side. I had never come across a talking cat before, but good manners, as my father used to say, cost nothing.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Cat."

The Cat's eyes opened wide and the grin fell from his face. He looked up and down the corridor for a few moments and then inquired:

"Me?"

I stifled a laugh.

"I don't see any others."

"Ah!" replied the Cat, giving me another broad grin. "That's because you have a temporary form of *cat blindness*."

"I'm not sure I've heard of that."

"It's quite common," he replied airily, licking a paw and stroking his whiskers. "I suppose you *have* heard of knight blindness, when you can't see any knights?"

"It's *night*, not knight," I corrected him.

"It all sounds the same to *me*."

"Suppose I *do* have cat blindness," I ventured. "Then how is it I can see you?"

"Suppose we change the subject?" retorted the Cat, waving a paw at the surroundings. "What do you think of the library?"

"It's pretty big," I murmured, looking all around me.

"Two hundred miles in every direction," said the Cat off-handedly and beginning to purr. "Twenty-six floors above ground, twenty-six below."

"You must have a copy of every book that's been written," I observed.

"Every book that will *ever* be written," corrected the Cat, "and a few others besides."

"How many?"

"Well, I've never counted them myself, but certainly more than twelve."

As the Cat grinned and blinked at me with his large green eyes I suddenly realized where I had seen him before.

"You're the Cheshire Cat, aren't you?" I asked.

"I *was* the Cheshire Cat," he replied with a slightly aggrieved air. "But they moved the county boundaries, so technically speaking I'm now the Unitary Authority of Warrington Cat, but it doesn't have the same ring to it. Oh, and welcome to Jurisdiction. You'll like it here; everyone is *quite* mad."

"But I don't want to go among mad people," I replied indignantly.

"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat. "We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

I snapped my fingers.

"Wait a moment!" I exclaimed. "This is the conversation you had in *Alice in Wonderland*, just after the baby turned into a pig!"

"Ah!" returned the Cat with an annoyed flick of his tail. "Fancy you can write your own dialogue, do you? I've seen people try; it's never a pretty sight. But have it your own way. And what's more, the baby turned into a fig, not a pig."

"It was a pig, actually."

"Fig," said the Cat stubbornly. "Who was in the book, me or you?"

"It was a pig," I insisted.

"Well!" exclaimed the Cat. "I'll go and check. *Then* you'll look pretty stupid, I can tell you!"

And so saying, he vanished.

I stood there for a moment or two wondering if things could get much odder. By the time I had thought that, no, they probably couldn't, the Cat's tail started to appear, then his body and finally his head and mouth.

"Well?" I asked.

"All right," grumbled the Cat, "so it *was* a pig. My hearing is not so good; I think it's all that pepper. By the by, I almost forgot. You're apprenticed to Miss Havisham."

"Miss Havisham? *Great Expectations*' Miss Havisham?"

"Is there any other? You'll be fine--just don't mention the wedding."

"I'll try not to. Wait a moment--apprenticed?"

"Of course. Getting here is only half the adventure. If you want to join us you'll have to learn the ropes. Right now all you can do is

journey. With a bit of practice on your own you *might* learn to be page-accurate when you jump. But if you want to delve deep into the backstory or take an excursion beyond the sleeve notes, you're going to have to take instruction. Why, by the time Miss Havisham has finished with you, you'll think nothing of being able to visit early drafts, deleted characters or long-discarded chapters that make little or no sense at all. Who knows, you may even glimpse the core of the book, the central nub of energy that binds a novel together."

"You mean the spine?" I asked, not quite up to speed yet.

The Cat lashed its tail in exasperation.

"No, stupid, the idea, the notion, the *spark*. Once you've laid your eyes on the raw concept of a book, everything you've ever seen or felt will seem about as interesting as a stair carpet. Try and imagine this: You are sitting on soft grass on a warm summer's evening in front of a dazzling sunset; the air is full of truly inspiring music and you have in your hands a wonderful book. Are you there?"

"I think so."

"Okay, now imagine a simply *vast* saucer of warm cream in front of you and consider lapping it *really* slowly until your whiskers are completely drenched."

The Cheshire Cat shivered deliriously.

"If you do all of that and multiply it by a thousand, then perhaps, just *perhaps*, you will have some idea of what I'm talking about."

"Can I pass on the cream?"

"Whatever you want. It's your daydream, after all."

And with a flick of his tail, the Cat vanished. I turned to explore my surroundings and was surprised to find that the Cheshire Cat was sitting on another shelf on the other side of the corridor.

"You seem a bit old to be an apprentice," continued the Cat, folding its paws and staring at me with an unnerving intensity. "We've been expecting you for almost twenty years. Where on earth have you been?"

"I . . . I . . . didn't know I could do this."

"What you mean is that you *did* know that you *couldn't*--it's quite a different thing. The point is, do you think you have what it takes to help us here at Jurisfiction?"

"I really don't know," I replied, truthfully enough--although I hung to the hope that this was the only way I even had a *chance* to get Landen back. But since I didn't see why he should ask all the questions, I asked: "What do *you* do?"

"I," said the Cat proudly, "am the librarian."

"You look after all these books?"

"Certainly. Ask me any question you want."

"*Jane Eyre*," I asked, intending only to ask its location but realizing

when the Cat answered that a librarian *here* was far removed from the sort I knew at home.

"Ranked the 728th favorite fictional book ever written," the Cat replied, parrot-fashion. "Total readings to date: 82,581,430. Current reading figure: 829,321--1,421 of whom are reading it as we speak. It's a good figure; quite possibly because it has been in the news recently."

"So what's the most-read book?"

"Up until now or forever and all time?"

"For all time."

The Cat thought for a moment.

"In fiction, the most-read book ever is *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Not just because it is a cracking good read for us, but because of all the Vertebrate uberclassics it was the only one that really translated well into Arthropod. And if you can crack the Lobster market--if you'll pardon the pun--a billion years from now, you're really going to flog some copies. The Arthropod title is *tlkiltlilkixlkilxiklkli*, or, literally translated, *The Past Nonexistent State of the Angelfish*. Atticus Finch is a lobster called Tkliki, and he defends a horseshoe crab named Klikiflik."

"How does it compare?"

"Not too bad, although the scene with the prawns is a little harrowing. It's the crustacean readership that makes Daphne Farquitt such a major player, too."

"Daphne Farquitt?" I echoed with some surprise. "But her books are *frightful*!"

"Only to us. To the highly evolved Arthropods, Farquitt's work is considered sacred and religious to the point of lunacy. Listen, I'm no fan of Farquitt's, but her bodice-ripping potboiler *The Squire of High Potternews* sparked one of the biggest, bloodiest, shellbrokenist wars the planet has ever witnessed."

I was getting off the point.

"So all these books are your responsibility?"

"Indeed," replied the Cat airily.

"If I wanted to go into a book I could just pick it up and read it?"

"It's not quite *that* easy," replied the Cat. "You can only get into a book if someone has already found a way in and then exited through the library. Every book, you will observe, is bound in either red or green. Green for go, red for no-go. It's quite easy, really--you're not color-blind, are you?"

"No. So if I wanted to go into--oh, I don't know, let's pull a title out of the air--'The Raven,' then--"

But the Cat flinched as I said the title.

"There are some places you *should not go*!" he muttered in a

reproachful tone, lashing his tail from side to side. "Edgar Allan Poe is one of them. His books are not fixed; there is a certain *otherness* that goes with them. Most of Macabre Gothic fiction tends to be like that--Sade is the same; also Webster, Wheatley and King. Go into those and you may *never* come out--they have a way of *weaving* you in the story, and before you know it you're stuck there. Let me show you something."

And all of a sudden we were in a large and hollow-sounding vestibule where huge Doric columns rose to support a high vaulted ceiling. The floor and walls were all dark red marble and reminded me of the entrance lobby of an old hotel--only about forty times as big. You could have parked an airship in here and *still* had room to hold an air race. There was a red carpet leading up from the high front doors, and all the brasswork shone like gold.

"This is where we honor the Boojummed," said the Cat in a quiet voice. He waved a paw in the direction of a large granite memorial about the size of two upended cars. The edifice was shaped like a large book, open in the center and splayed wide with the depiction of a person walking into the left-hand page, the person's form covered by text as he entered. On the opposite page were row upon row of names. A mason was delicately working on a new name with a mallet and chisel. He tipped his hat respectfully and resumed his work.

"Prose Resource Operatives deleted or lost in the line of duty," explained the Cat from where he was perched on top of the statue. "We call it the Boojumorial."

I pointed to a name on the memorial.

"Ambrose Bierce was a Jurisfiction agent?"

"One of the best. Dear, sweet Ambrose! A master of prose, but *quite* impetuous. He went--alone--into 'The Literary Life of Thingum Bob'--a Poe short story that one would've thought held no terrors."

The Cat sighed before continuing.

"He was trying to find a back door into Poe's poems. We know you can get from 'Thingum Bob' into 'The Black Cat' by way of an unstable verb in the third paragraph, and from 'Black Cat' into 'The Fall of the House of Usher' by the simple expedient of hiring a horse from the Nicaean stables; from there he was hoping to use the poem within 'Usher,' 'The Haunted Palace,' to springboard him into the rest of the Poe poetical canon."

"What happened?"

"Never heard from him again. Two fellow booksplorers went in after him. One lost his breath, and the other, well, poor Ahab went completely bonkers--thought he was being chased by a white whale. We suspect that Ambrose was either walled up with a cask of Amontillado or buried alive or suffered some other unspeakable fate.

It was decided that Poe was out of bounds."

"So Antoine de St. Exupery, he disappeared on assignment too?"

"Not at all; he crashed on a reconnaissance sortie."

"It was tragic."

"It certainly was," replied the Cat. "He owed me forty francs *and* had promised to teach me to play Debussy on the piano using only oranges."

"Oranges?"

"Oranges. Well, I'm off now. Miss Havisham will explain everything. Go through those doors into the library, take the elevator to the fourth floor, first right, and the books are about a hundred yards on your left. *Great Expectations* is green-bound, so you should have no trouble."

"Thanks."

"Oh, it's nothing," said the Cat, and with a wave of his paw he started to fade, very slowly, from the tip of his tail. He just had time to ask me to get some tuna-flavored Moggilicious for him the next time I was home before he vanished completely and I was alone in front of the granite Boojumorial, the quiet tapping of the mason's hammer echoing around the lofty heights of the library vestibule.

I took the marble stairs into the library and ascended by one of the wrought-iron lifts, walked down the corridor until I came across several shelves of Dickens novels. There were, I noted, twenty-nine different editions of *Great Expectations* from early draft to the last of Dickens's own revised editions. I picked up the newest tome, opened it at the first chapter and heard the gentle sound of wind in the trees. I flipped through the pages, the sounds changing as I moved from scene to scene, page to page. I located the first mention of Miss Havisham, found a good place to start and then read loudly to myself, *willing* the words to live. And live they did.

## 17.

### Miss Havisham

*Great Expectations* was written in 1860-61 to reverse flagging sales of *All the Year Round*, the weekly periodical founded by Dickens himself. The novel was regarded as a great success. The tale of Pip the blacksmith's apprentice and his rise to the position of young gentleman through an anonymous benefactor introduced readers to many new and varied characters: Joe Gargery, the simple and honorable blacksmith; Abel Magwitch, the convict Pip helps in the first chapter; Jaggers, the lawyer; Herbert Pocket, who befriends him and teaches him how to behave in London society. But it is Miss Havisham, abandoned at the altar and living her life in dreary isolation dressed in her tattered wedding robes, that steals the show. She remains one of the book's most memorable fixtures.

MILLON DE FLOSS,  
*"Great Expectations": A Study*

I FOUND MYSELF in a large and dark hall which smelt of musty decay. The windows were tightly shuttered, the only light from a few candles scattered around the room; they added little to the room except to heighten the gloominess. In the center of the room a long table was covered with what had once been a wedding banquet but was now a sad arrangement of tarnished silver and dusty crockery. In the bowls and meat platters dried remnants of food were visible, and in the middle of the table a large wedding cake bedecked with cobwebs had begun to collapse like a dilapidated building. I had read the scene many times, but it was somehow different when you saw it for real--for a start, it was more colorful--and there was also a smell of mustiness that rarely comes out in the readings. I was on the other side of the room from Miss Havisham, Estella and Pip. I stood silently and watched.

A game of cards had just ended between Pip and Estella, and Miss Havisham, resplendently shabby in her rotting wedding dress and veil, seemed to be trying to come to a decision.

"When shall I have you here again?" said Miss Havisham in a low growl. "Let me think."

"Today is Wednesday, ma'am--" began Pip, but he was silenced by Miss Havisham.

"There, there! I know nothing of days of the week; I know nothing of weeks of the year. Come again after six days. You hear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Miss Havisham sighed deeply and addressed the young woman, who seemed to spend most of her time glaring at Pip; his discomfort in the strange surroundings seemed to fill her with inner mirth.



"Estella, take him down. Let him have something to eat, and let him roam and look about him while he eats. Go, Pip."

They left the darkened room, and I watched as Miss Havisham stared at the floor, then at the half-filled trunks of old and yellowed clothes that might have accompanied her on her honeymoon. I watched her as she pulled off her veil, ran her fingers through her graying hair and kicked off her shoes. She looked about her, checked the door was closed and then opened a bureau that I could see was full, not of the trappings of her wretched life, but of small luxuries that must, I presumed, make her existence here that much more bearable. Amongst other things I saw a Sony Walkman, a stack of *National Geographics*, a few Daphne Farquitt novels, and one of those bats that has a rubber ball attached to a piece of elastic. She rummaged some more and took out a pair of trainers and pulled them on, with a great deal of relief. She was just about to tie the laces when I shifted my weight and knocked against a small table. Havisham, her senses heightened by her long incarceration in silent introspection, gazed in my direction, her sharp eyes piercing the gloom.

"Who is there?" she asked sharply. "Estella, is that you?"

Hiding didn't seem to be a worthwhile option, so I stepped from the shadows. She looked me up and down with a critical eye.

"What is your name, child?" she asked sternly.

"Thursday Next, ma'am."

"Ah!" she said again. "The *Next* girl. Took you long enough to find your way in here, didn't it?"

"Sorry--?"

"*Never* be sorry, girl--it's a waste of time, believe me. If only you had seriously attempted to come to Jurisfiction after Mrs. Nakajima showed you how up at Haworth--well, I'm wasting my breath, I have no doubt."

"I had no idea--!"

"I don't often take apprentices," she carried on, disregarding me completely, "but they were going to allocate you to the Red Queen. The Red Queen and I don't get along, I suppose you've heard that?"

"No, I've--"

"Half of all she says is nonsense and the other half is irrelevant. Mrs. Nakajima recommended you most highly, but she has been wrong before; cause any trouble and I'll bounce you out of Jurisfiction quicker than you can say ketchup. How are you at tying shoelaces?"

So I tied Miss Havisham's trainers for her, there in Satis House amongst the rotted trappings of her abandoned marriage. It seemed churlish to refuse, and I really didn't mind. If Havisham was my teacher, I would do whatever she reasonably expected of me. I'd not get into "The Raven" without her help, that much was obvious.

"There are three simple rules if you want to stay with me," continued Miss Havisham in the sort of voice that seeks no argument. "Rule One: You do *exactly* as I tell you. Rule Two: You don't patronize me with your pity. I have no desire to be helped in any way. What I do to myself and others is my business and my business alone. Do you understand?"

"What about Rule Three?"

"All in good time. I shall call you Thursday and you may call me Miss Havisham when we are together; in company I shall expect you to call me ma'am. I may summon you at any time and you will come running. Only funerals, childbirth or Vivaldi concerts take precedence. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Miss Havisham."

I stood up and she thrust a candle nearer to my face and regarded me closely. It gave me a chance to look at her too-- despite her pallid demeanor, her eyes sparkled brightly and she was not nearly as old as I supposed; all she needed was a fortnight of good meals and some fresh air. I was tempted to say something to enliven the dismal surroundings but her iron personality stopped me; I felt as though I were facing my teacher at school for the first time.

"Intelligent eyes," muttered Havisham. "Committed and honest. Quite, quite sickeningly self-righteous. Are you married?"

"Yes--" I mumbled. "That is to say--no."

"Come, come!" said Havisham angrily. "It is a simple enough question."

"I was married," I answered.

"Died?"

"No--" I mumbled. "That is to say--yes."

"I'll try harder questions in future," announced Havisham, "for you are obviously not adept at the easy ones. Have you met the Jurisfiction staff?"

"I've met Mr. Snell--and the Cheshire Cat."

"As useless as each other," she announced shortly. "Everyone at Jurisfiction is either a charlatan or an imbecile--except the Red Queen, who is both. We'll go to Norland Park and meet them all, I suppose."

"Norland? Jane Austen? The house of the Dashwoods? *Sense and Sensibility*?"

But Havisham had moved on. She held my wrist to look at my watch and took me by the elbow, and before I knew what had happened we had joggled out of Satis House to the library. Before I could recover from this sudden change of surroundings, Miss Havisham was reading from a book she had drawn from a shelf. There was another strange joggle and we were in a small kitchen parlor somewhere.

"What was that?" I asked in alarm; I wasn't at all accustomed to the sudden move from book to book, but Havisham, well used to such maneuvers, thought little of it.

"That," replied Miss Havisham, "was a standard book-to-book transfer. When you're jumping solo you can sometimes make it through without going to the library--so much the better; the Cat's banal musings can make one's head ache. But since I am taking you with me, a short visit is sadly necessary. We're now in the backstory of Kafka's *The Trial*. Next door is Josef K's hearing; you're up after him."

"Oh," I remarked, "is that all?"

Miss Havisham missed the sarcasm, which was probably just as well, and I looked around. The room was sparsely furnished. A washing tub sat in the middle of the room, and next door, from the sound of it at least, a political meeting seemed to be in progress. A woman entered from the courtroom, smoothed her skirts, curtsied and returned to her washing.

"Good morning, Miss Havisham," she said politely.

"Good morning, Esther," replied Miss Havisham. "I brought you something." Havisham handed her a box of Pontefract cakes and then asked: "Are we on time?"

There was a roar of laughter from behind the door which quickly subsided into excited talking.

"Won't be long," replied the washerwoman. "Snell and Hopkins have both gone in already. Would you like to take a seat?"

Miss Havisham sat, but I remained standing.

"I hope Snell knows what he's doing," muttered Havisham darkly. "The Examining Magistrate is something of an unknown quantity."

The applause and laughter suddenly dropped to silence in the room next door and we heard the door handle grasped. Behind the door a deep voice said: "I only wanted to point out to you, since you may not have realized it yet, that today you have thrown away all the advantage that a hearing affords an arrested man in every case."

I looked at Havisham with some consternation, but she shook her head, as though to tell me not to worry.

"You scoundrels!" shouted a second voice, still from behind the door. "You can keep all your hearings!"

The door opened and a young man with a red face and dressed in a dark suit ran out, fairly shaking with rage. As he left, the man who had spoken--I assumed this to be the Examining Magistrate--shook his head sadly and the courtroom started to chatter about Josef K's outburst. The Magistrate, a small fat man who breathed heavily, looked at me and said: "Thursday N?"

"Yes sir?"

"You're late."

And he shut the door.

"Don't worry," said Miss Havisham kindly, "he always says that. It's to make you ill at ease."

"It works. Aren't you coming in with me?"

She shook her head and placed her hand on mine. "Have you read *The Trial*?"

I nodded.

"Then you will know what to expect. Good luck, my dear."

I thanked her, took a deep breath, grasped the door handle and with heavily beating heart, entered.

## 18.

### The Trial of Fraulein N

*The Trial*, Franz Kafka's enigmatic masterpiece of bureaucratic paranoia, was unpublished in the writer's lifetime. Indeed, Kafka lived out his short life in relative obscurity as an insurance clerk and bequeathed his manuscripts to his best friend on the understanding that they would be destroyed. How many other great writers, one wonders, penned masterworks which actually *were* destroyed upon their death? For the answer, you will have to look in amongst the subbasements of the Great Library, twenty-six floors of unpublished manuscripts. Amongst a lot of self-indulgent rubbish and valiant yet failed attempts at prose you will find works of pure genius. For the greatest nonwork of non-fiction, go to subbasement thirteen, Category MCML, Shelf 2919/B12, where a rare and wonderful treat awaits you--*Bunyan's Footscrapper* by John McSquurd. But be warned. No trip to the *Well of Lost Plots* should be undertaken alone. . . .

UNITARY AUTHORITY OF WARRINGTON CAT,  
*The Jurisfiction Guide to the Great Library*

THE COURTROOM was packed full of men all dressed in dark suits and chattering and gesticulating constantly. There was a gallery running around just below the ceiling where more people stood, also talking and laughing, and the room was hot and airless to the point of suffocation. There was a narrow path between the men, and I slowly advanced, the crowd merging behind me and almost propelling me forward. As I walked the spectators chattered about the weather, the previous case, what I was wearing and the finer points of my case--of which, it seemed, they knew nothing. At the other end of the hall was a low dais upon which was seated, just behind a low table, the Examining Magistrate. He was on a high chair to make himself seem bigger and was shiny with perspiration. Behind him were court officials and clerks talking with the crowd and each other. To one side of the dais was the lugubrious man who had knocked on my door and tricked me into confessing back in Swindon. He was holding an impressive array of official-looking papers. This, I assumed, was Mathew Hopkins, the prosecution lawyer. Snell was standing next to him but joined me as soon as I approached and whispered in my ear:

"This is only a formal hearing to see if there is a case to answer. With a bit of luck we can get your case postponed to a more friendly court. Ignore the onlookers--they are simply here as a narrative device to heighten paranoia and have no bearing on your case. We will deny all charges.

"Herr Magistrate," said Snell as we took the last few paces to the dais, "my name is Akrid S, defending Thursday N in *Jurisfiction v. The*

Law, case number 142857."

The Magistrate looked at me, took out his watch and said:

"You should have been here an hour and five minutes ago."

There was an excited murmur from the crowd. Snell opened his mouth to say something, but it was I that answered.

"I know," I said, having read a bit of Kafka in my youth and attempting a radical approach to the proceedings, "*I am to blame*. I beg the court's pardon."

At first the Magistrate didn't hear me and he began to repeat himself for the benefit of the crowd: "You should have been here an hour and-- What did you say?"

"I said I was sorry and begged your pardon, sir," I repeated.

"Oh," said the Examining Magistrate as a hush fell upon the room. "In *that* case, would you like to go away and come back in, say, an hour and five minutes' time, when you *will* be late through no fault of your own?"

The crowd applauded at this, although I couldn't see why.

"At your honor's pleasure," I replied. "If it is the court's ruling that I do so, then I will comply."

"Very good," whispered Snell.

"Oh!" said the Magistrate again. He briefly conferred with his clerks behind him, seemed rattled for a moment, stared at me again and said: "It is the court's decision that you be one hour and five minutes late!"

"I am *already* one hour and five minutes late!" I announced to scattered applause from the room.

"Then," said the Magistrate simply, "you have complied with the court's ruling and we may proceed."

"Objection!" said Hopkins.

"Overruled," replied the Magistrate as he picked up a tatty notebook that lay on the table in front of him. He opened it, read something and passed the book to one of his clerks.

"Your name is Thursday N. You are a housepainter?"

"No, she--" said Snell.

"Yes," I interrupted, "I have *been* a housepainter, your honor."

There was a stunned silence from the crowd, punctuated by someone at the back who yelled "Bravo!" before another spectator thumped him. The Examining Magistrate peered closer at me.

"Is this relevant?" demanded Hopkins, addressing the bench.

"Silence!" yelled the Magistrate, continuing slowly and with very real gravity: "You mean to tell me that you have, at one time, been a housepainter?"

"Indeed, your honor. After I left school and before college I painted houses for two months. I think it might be safe to say that I was

indeed--although not permanently--a housepainter."

There was another burst of applause and excited murmuring.

"Herr S?" said the Magistrate. "Is this true?"

"We have several witnesses to attest to it, your honor," answered Snell, getting into the swing of the strange proceedings.

The room fell silent again.

"Herr H," said the magistrate, taking out a handkerchief and mopping his brow carefully and addressing Hopkins directly, "I thought you told me the defendant was *not* a housepainter?"

Hopkins looked flustered.

"I didn't say she *wasn't* a housepainter, your honor, I merely said she was an operative for SpecOps-27."

"To the exclusion of all other professions?" asked the Magistrate.

"Well, no," stammered Hopkins, now thoroughly confused.

"Yet you did not state she was *not* a housepainter in your affidavit, did you?"

"No sir."

"Well then!" said the Magistrate, leaning back on his chair as another peal of laughter and spontaneous applause broke out for no reason. "If you bring a case to my court, Herr H, I expect it to be brought with all the details intact. First she apologizes for being late, then she readily agrees to a past profession as a housepainter. Court procedure will *not* be compromised--your prosecution is badly flawed."

Hopkins bit his lip and turned a dark shade of crimson.

"I beg the court's pardon, your honor," he replied through gritted teeth, "but my prosecution is sound. May we proceed with the charge?"

"Bravo!" said the man at the back again.

The Magistrate thought for a moment and handed me his dirty notebook and a fountain pen.

"We will prove the veracity of prosecution counsel by a simple test," he announced. "Fraulein N, would you please write the most popular color that houses were painted in, when you were--" and here he turned to Hopkins and spat the words out--"a housepainter!"

The room erupted into cheers and shouts as I wrote the answer in the back of the exercise book and returned it.

"Silence!" announced the Magistrate. "Herr H?"

"What?" he replied sulkily.

"Perhaps you would be good enough to tell the court the color that Fraulein N has written in my book?"

"Your honor," began Hopkins in an exasperated tone, "what has this to do with the case in hand? I arrived here in good faith to arraign Fraulein N on a charge of a Class II Fiction Infraction and instead I find myself embroiled in some lunatic rubbish about housepainters. I

do not believe this court represents justice--"

"You do *not* understand," said the Magistrate, rising to his feet and raising his short arms to illustrate the point, "the manner in which this court works. It is the responsibility of the prosecution council to not only bring a clear and concise case before the bench, but also to fully verse himself in the procedures that he must undertake to achieve that goal."

The Magistrate sat down amidst applause.

"Now," continued the Magistrate in a quieter voice, "either you tell me what Fraulein N has written in this book or I will be forced to arrest you for wasting the court's time."

Two guards had pushed their way through the throng and now stood behind Hopkins, ready to seize him. The Magistrate waved the book and fixed the lawyer with an imperious stare.

"Well?" he inquired. "What was the most popular color?"

"Blue," said Hopkins in a miserable voice.

"What's that you say?"

"Blue," repeated Hopkins in a louder voice.

"Blue, he said!" bellowed the Magistrate. The crowd were silent and pushed and shoved to get closer to the action. Slowly and with high drama, the Magistrate opened the book to reveal the word *green* written across the page. The crowd burst into an excited cry, several cheers went up, and hats rained down upon our heads.

"Not blue, *green*," said the Magistrate, shaking his head sadly and signaling to the guards to take hold of Hopkins. "You have brought shame upon your profession, Herr H. You are under arrest!"

"On what charge?" replied Hopkins arrogantly.

"I am not authorized to tell you," said the Magistrate triumphantly. "Proceedings have been started and you will be informed in due course."

"But this is preposterous!" shouted Hopkins as he was dragged away.

"No," replied the Magistrate, "this is Kafka."

When Hopkins had gone and the crowd had stopped chattering, the Magistrate turned back to me and said: "You are Thursday N, age thirty-six, one hour and five minutes late and occupation housepainter?"

"Yes?"

"You are brought before this court on a charge of--what is the charge?"

There was silence.

"Where," asked the magistrate, "is the prosecution counsel?"

One of his clerks whispered in his ear as the crowd spontaneously burst into laughter.



"Indeed," said the Magistrate grimly. "Most remiss of him. I am afraid, in the absence of prosecuting counsel, this court has no alternative but to grant a postponement."

And so saying he pulled a large rubber stamp from his pocket and brought it down with a crash on some papers that Snell, quick as a flash, managed to place beneath it.

"Thank you, your honor," I managed to say before Snell grasped me by the arm, whispered in my ear, "Let's get the hell out of here!" and steered me ahead of him past the throng of dark suits to the door.

"Bravo!" yelled a man from the gallery. "Bravo!... and bravo again!"

We walked out to find Miss Havisham deep in conversation with Esther about the perfidious nature of men in general and Esther's husband in particular. They were not the only ones in the room. A bronzed Greek was sitting sullenly next to a Cyclops who had a bloodied bandage round his head. The lawyers who were accompanying them were discussing the case quietly in the corner.

"How did it go?" asked Havisham.

"Postponement," said Snell, mopping his brow and shaking me by the hand. "Well done, Thursday. Caught me unawares with your housepainter defense. Very good indeed!"

"But only a postponement?"

"Oh yes. I've never known a single acquittal from this court. But next time we'll be up before a proper judge--one of *my* choosing!"

"And what will become of Hopkins?"

"He," laughed Snell, "will have to get a *very* good lawyer!"

"Good!" said Havisham, getting to her feet. "It's time we were at the sales. Come along!"

As we made for the door, the Magistrate called into the kitchen parlor: "Odysseus? Charge of Grievous Bodily Harm against Polyphemus the Cyclops?"

"He devoured my comrades--!" growled Odysseus angrily.

"That's tomorrow's case. We will not hear about that today. You're next up--and you're late."

And the Examining Magistrate shut the door again.

## 19.

### Bargain Books

Jurisdiction was the fastest learning curve I had ever experienced. I think they were all expecting me to arrive a lot earlier than I did. Miss Havisham tested my bookjumping prowess soon after I arrived and I was marked up a dismal 38 out of a hundred. Mrs. Nakajima was 93 and Havisham a 99. I would always need a book to read from to make a jump, no matter how well I had memorized the text. It had its disadvantages but it wasn't all bad news. At least I could read a book without vanishing off inside it. . . .

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*The Jurisdiction Chronicles*

OUTSIDE THE ROOM, Snell tipped his hat and vanished off to represent a client currently languishing in debtor's prison. The day was overcast yet mild. I leaned on the balcony and looked down into the yard below at the children playing.

"So!" said Havisham. "On with your training now *that* hurdle is over. The Swindon Booktastic closing-down sale begins at midday and I'm in the mood for a bit of bargain-hunting. Take me there."

"How?"

"Use your head, girl!" replied Havisham sternly as she grabbed her walking stick and thrashed it through the air a few times. "Come, come! If you can't jump me straight there, then take me to your apartment and we'll drive--but hurry. The Red Queen is ahead of us and there is a boxed set of novels that she is particularly keen to get her hands on--we *must* get there first!"

"I'm sorry--" I stammered. "I can't--"

"No such word as *can't*!" exploded Miss Havisham. "Use the book, girl, use *the book*!"

Suddenly, I understood. I took the leather-bound Jurisdiction book from my pocket and opened it. The first page, the one I had read already, was of the Great Library. On the second page there was a passage from Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and on the third a detailed description of my apartment back at Swindon--it was good, too, right down to the water stains on the kitchen ceiling and the magazines stuffed under the sofa. The rest of the pages were covered with closely printed rules and regulations, hints and tips, advice and places to avoid. There were illustrations, too, and maps quite unlike any I had seen before. There were, in fact, far *more* pages in the book than could possibly be fitted within the covers.

"Well?" said Havisham impatiently. "Are we going?"

I flicked to the page that held the short description of my apartment in Swindon. I started to read and felt Havisham's bony hand hang on

to my elbow as the Prague rooftops and aging tenement buildings faded out and my own apartment hove into view.

"Ah!" said Havisham, looking around at the small kitchen with a contemptuous air. "And this is what you call home?"

"At the moment. My husband--"

"The one who you're not sure is alive or dead or married to you or not?"

"Yes," I said firmly, "*that* one."

She smiled at this and added with a baleful stare: "You wouldn't have an ulterior motive for joining me, would you?"

"No," I lied.

"Didn't come to do something else?"

"Absolutely not."

"Not some sort of *book privateer* or something, out for riches and adventure?"

I shook my head. Doing what I was doing for Landen might not have sat too well with Havisham, so I decided to keep myself to myself.

"You're lying about something," she announced slowly, "but about *what* I'm not so sure. Children are such consummate liars. Have your servants recently left you?"

She was staring at the dirty dishes.

"Yes," I lied again, not so keen on her disparagement anymore. "Domestic service is a tricky issue in 1985."

"It's no bed of roses in the nineteenth century either," Miss Havisham replied, leaning on the kitchen table to steady herself. "I find a good servant but they never stay. It's the lure of *them*, you know--the liars, the *evil ones*."

"Evil ones?"

"*Men!*" hissed Havisham contemptuously. "The lying sex. Mark my words, child, for no good will ever come of you if you succumb to their charms--and they have the charms of a snake, believe me!"

"I'll try to keep on my toes," I told her.

"And your chastity *firmly* guarded," she told me sternly.

"Goes without saying."

"Good. Can I borrow that jacket?"

She was pointing at Miles Hawke's Swindon Mallets jacket. Without waiting for a reply she put it on and replaced her veil with a SpecOps cap. Satisfied, she asked: "Is this the way out?"

"No, that's the broom cupboard. This is the way out over here."

We opened the door to find my landlord with his fist raised ready to knock.

"Ah!" he said in a low growl. "Next!"

"You said I had until Friday," I told him.

"I'm turning off the water. The gas, too."

"You can't do that!"

"If you've got six hundred quid or a V1.2 dodo on you," he leered, "perhaps I can be convinced not to."

But his smirk changed to fear as the point of Miss Havisham's stick shot out and caught him in the throat. She pushed him heavily against the wall in the corridor. He choked and made to move the stick, but Miss Havisham knew just how much pressure was needed--she pushed the stick harder and he stayed his hand.

"Listen to me!" she snapped. "Annoy Miss Next once more and you'll have me to answer to. She'll pay you on time, you worthless wretch--you have Miss Havisham's word on *that*!"

He gasped in short breaths, the tip of Miss Havisham's stick stuck fast against his windpipe. His eyes were clouded with the panic of suffocation; all he could do was breathe fitfully and try to nod.

"Good!" replied Miss Havisham, releasing the man, who fell into a heap on the floor.

"The evil ones," announced Miss Havisham. "You see what men are like?"

"They're not *all* like that," I tried to explain.

"Nonsense!" replied Miss Havisham as we walked downstairs. "He was one of the better ones. At least he didn't attempt to lie his way into your favors. In fact, I would go as far as to say that this one was barely repulsive at all. Do you have a car?"

Miss Havisham's eyebrows rose slightly as she saw the curious paintwork on my Porsche.

"It was painted this way when I bought it," I explained.

"I see," replied Miss Havisham in a disapproving tone. "Keys?"

"I don't think--"

"The keys, girl! What was Rule One again?"

"Do exactly as you say."

"Disobedient perhaps," she replied with a thin smile, "but not forgetful!"

I reluctantly handed over the keys. Havisham grasped them with a gleam in her eye and jumped in the driver's seat.

"Is it the four-cam engine?" she asked excitedly.

"No," I replied, "standard 1.6 unit."

"Oh well!" snorted Havisham, pumping the accelerator twice before turning the key. "It'll have to do, I suppose."

The engine burst into life. Havisham gave me a smile and a wink as she revved the engine up to the redline before briskly snapping the gearshift into first gear and dropping the clutch. There was a screech of rubber as we careered off up the road, the rear of the car swinging from side to side as the spinning wheels sought to find traction on the

asphalt.

I have not been frightened many times in my life. Charging into the massed artillery of the Imperial Russian Army had a surreal detachment that I had found eerie rather than fearsome. Tackling Hades first in London and then on the roof of Thornfield Hall had been quite unpleasant. So had leading an armed police raid, and the two occasions I had stared at close quarters down the barrel of a gun hadn't been a bundle of joy either.

None of those, however, *even came close* to the feeling of almost certain death that I experienced during Miss Havisham's driving. We must have violated every road traffic regulation that had ever been written. We narrowly missed pedestrians, other cars and traffic bollards and ran three traffic lights at red before Miss Havisham had to stop at a junction to let a juggernaut go past. She was smiling to herself, and although erratic and bordering on homicidal, her driving had a sort of *idiot savant* skill about it. Just when I thought it was impossible to avoid a postbox she tweaked the brakes, flicked down a gear-- and missed the unyielding iron lump by the width of a hair.

"The carburetors seem slightly unbalanced!" she bellowed above the terrified screams of pedestrians. "Let's have a look, shall we?" She hauled on the handbrake and we slid sideways up a dropped curbstone and stopped next to an open-air cafe, causing a group of nuns to run for cover. Havisham climbed out of the car and opened the engine cover.

"Rev the car for me, girl!" she shouted. I did as I was told. I offered a weak smile to one of the customers at the cafe, who eyed me malevolently.

"She doesn't get out often," I explained as Havisham returned to the driver's seat, revved the engine loudly and left the customers at the cafe in a cloud of foul-smelling rubber smoke.

"That's better!" yelled Miss Havisham. "Can't you hear it? *Much* better!"

All I could hear was the wail of a police siren that had started up.

"Oh, Christ!" I muttered; Miss Havisham punched me painfully on the arm.

"What was that for?"

"Blaspheming! If there is one thing I hate more than men, it's blaspheming--Get out of my way, you godless heathens!"

A group of people at a pedestrian crossing scattered in confused panic as Havisham shot past, angrily waving her fist. I looked behind us as a police car came into view, blue lights flashing, sirens blaring. I could see the occupants bracing themselves as they took the corner; Miss Havisham dropped a gear and we took a tight left bend, ran the wheels on the curb, swerved to avoid a mother with a pram and found

ourselves in a car park. We accelerated between the rows of parked cars, but the only way out was blocked by a delivery van. Miss Havisham stamped on the brakes, flicked the car into reverse and negotiated a neat reverse slide that took us off in the opposite direction.

"Don't you think we'd better stop?" I asked.

"Nonsense, girl!" snapped Havisham, looking for a way out while the police car nosed up to our rear bumper. "Not with the sales about to open. Here we go! Hold on!"

There was only one way out of the car park that didn't involve capture: a path between two concrete bollards that looked way too narrow for my car. But Miss Havisham's eyes were sharper than mine and we shot through the gap, bounced across a grass bank, skidded past the statue of Brunel, drove the wrong way down a one-way street, through a back alley, past the Carer's Monument and across the pedestrianized precinct to screech to a halt in front of a large queue that had gathered for the Swindon Booktastic closing-down sale--just as the town clock struck twelve.

"You nearly killed eight people!" I managed to gasp out loud.

"My count was closer to twelve," returned Havisham as she opened the door. "And anyhow, you can't *nearly* kill someone. Either they are dead or they are not; and not one of them was so much as scratched!"

The police car slid to a halt behind us; both sides of the car had deep gouges down the side--the bollards, I presumed.

"I'm more used to my Bugatti than this," said Miss Havisham as she handed me the keys, got out and slammed the door, "but it's not so very bad, now is it? I like the gearbox especially."

I knew both of the officers and they didn't look very amused. The local PD didn't much care for SpecOps and we didn't much care for them. They would be overjoyed to pin something on any of us. They peered at Miss Havisham closely, unsure of how to put their outrage at her flagrant disregard for the Road Traffic Act into words.

"You," said one of the officers in a barely controlled voice, "you, madam, are in a lot of trouble."

She looked at the young officer with an imperious glare.

"Young man, you have no idea of the word!"

"Listen, Rawlings," I interrupted, "can we--"

"Miss Next," replied the officer firmly but positively, "your turn will come, okay?"

I got out of the car.

"Name?"

"Miss *Dame-rouge*," announced Havisham, lying spectacularly, "and don't bother asking me for my license or insurance-- I haven't either!"

The officer pondered this for a moment.

"I'd like you to get in my car, madam. I'm going to have to take you in for questioning."

"Am I under arrest?"

"If you refuse to come with me."

Havisham glanced at me and mouthed, "After three." She then sighed deeply and walked over to the police car in a very overdramatic manner, shaking with muscle tremors and generally behaving like the ancient person she wasn't. I looked at her hand as she signaled to me--out of sight of the officers--a single finger, then two, then finally, as she rested for a moment against the front wing of their car, the third and final finger.

"Look out!" I yelled, pointing up.

The officers, mindful of the Hispano-Suiza accident two days before, dutifully looked up as Havisham and I bolted to the head of the queue, pretending we knew someone. The two officers wasted no time and leapt after us, only to lose us in the crowd as the doors to Swindon Booktastic opened and a sea of keen bibliophiles of all different ages and reading tastes moved forward, knocking both officers off their feet and sweeping Miss Havisham and me into the bowels of the bookstore.

Inside there was a near riot in progress, and I was soon separated from Miss Havisham; ahead of me a pair of middle-aged men were arguing over a signed copy of Kerouac's *On the Road* which eventually ripped down the middle. I fought my way round the ground floor past Cartography, Travel and Self-Help and was just giving up the idea of ever seeing Havisham again when I noticed a red flowing robe poking out from beneath a fawn macintosh. I watched the crimson hem cross the floor and go into the elevator. I ran across and put my foot in the door just before it shut. The neanderthal lift operator looked at me curiously, opened the doors to let me in and then closed them again. The Red Queen stared at me loftily and shuffled slightly to achieve a more regal position. She was quite heavily built; her hair was a bright auburn shade tied up in a neat bun under her crown, which had been hastily concealed under the hood of her cloak. She was dressed completely in red, and I suspected that under her makeup her skin might be red, too.

"Good morning, your majesty," I said, as politely as I could.

"Humph!" replied the red queen, then after a pause, added: "Are you that tawdry Havisham woman's new apprentice?"

"Since this morning, ma'am."

"A morning wasted, I shouldn't wonder. Do you have a name?"

"Thursday Next, ma'am."

"You may curtsy if you so wish."

So I did.

"You will regret not learning with me, my dear--but you are, of course, merely a child, and right and wrong are so difficult to spot at your tender age."

"Which floor, your majesty?" asked the neanderthal.

The Red Queen beamed at him, told him that if he played his cards right she would make him a duke and then added, "Three," as an afterthought.

There was one of those funny empty pauses that seem to exist only in elevators and dentist waiting rooms. We stared at the floor indicator as it moved slowly upwards and stopped on the second floor.

"Second floor," announced the neanderthal. "Historical, Allegorical, Historical-Allegorical, Poetry, Plays, Theology, Critical Analysis and Pencils."

Someone tried to get on. The Red Queen barked "Taken!" in such a fearful tone that the person backed out again.

"And how is Havisham these days?" asked the Red Queen with a diffident air as the lift moved upwards again.

"Well, I think," I replied.

"You must ask her about her wedding."

"I don't think that's very wise," I returned.

"Decidedly not!" said the Red Queen, guffawing like a sea lion. "But it will elicit an amusing effect. Like Vesuvius, as I recall!"

"Third floor," announced the neanderthal. "Fiction, Popular, authors A-J."

The doors opened to reveal a mass of book fans, fighting in a most unseemly fashion over what even I had to admit were some very good bargains. I had heard about these Fiction Frenzies before--but never witnessed one.

"Come, this is more like it!" announced the Red Queen happily, rubbing her hands together and knocking a little old lady flying as she hopped out of the elevator.

"Where are you, Havisham?" she yelled, looking to left and right. "She has to be . . . Yes! Yes! Ahoy there, Stella, you old trollop!"

Miss Havisham stopped in mid-stride and stared in the Queen's direction. In a single swift movement she drew a small pistol from the folds of her tattered wedding dress and loosed off a shot in our direction. The Red Queen ducked as the bullet knocked a corner off a plaster cornice.

"Temper, temper!" shouted the Red Queen, but Havisham was no longer there.

"Hah!" said the Red Queen, hopping into the fray. "The devil take her--she's heading towards Romantic Fiction!"

"Romantic Fiction?" I echoed, thinking of Havisham's hatred of men. "I don't think that's very likely!"



The Red Queen ignored me and made a detour through Fantasy to avoid a scrum near the Agatha Christie counter. I knew the store a little better and nipped in between Haggard and Herge, where I was just in time to see Miss Havisham make her first mistake. In her haste she had pushed past a little old lady sizing up a "buy two get one free" offer on contemporary fiction. The little old lady--no stranger to department store sales battle tactics--parried Havisham's blow expertly and hooked her bamboo-handled umbrella around her ankle. Havisham came down with a heavy thud and lay still, the breath knocked out of her. I kneeled beside her as the Red Queen hopped past, laughing loudly and making "nyah, nyah" noises.

"Thursday!" panted Miss Havisham as several stockinged feet ran across her. "A complete set of Daphne Farquitt novels in a walnut display case--*run!*"

And run I did. Farquitt was so prolific and popular she had a bookshelf all to herself, and her recent boxed sets were fast becoming collector's items--it was not surprising that there was a fight in progress. I entered the scrum behind the Red Queen and was instantly punched on the nose. I reeled with the shock and was pushed heavily from behind while someone else--an accomplice, I assumed--thrust a walking stick between my shins. I lost my footing and fell with a thud on the hard wooden floor. This was not a safe place to be. I crawled out of the battle and joined Miss Havisham where she had taken cover behind a display of generously discounted Du Maurier novels.

"Not so easy as it looks, eh, girl?" asked Havisham with a rare smile, holding a lacy white handkerchief to my bleeding nose. "How close is the Royal Harridan to the Farquitt shelves?"

"I last saw her fighting somewhere between Ervine and Euripides."

"Blast!" replied Havisham with a grunt. "Listen, girl, I'm done for. My ankle's twisted and I think I've had it. But you-- you might be able to make it."

I looked out at the squabbling masses as a pocket derringer fell to the ground not far from us.

"I thought this might happen," she continued, "so I drew a map."

She unfolded a piece of Satis House notepaper and pointed out where she thought we were.

"You won't make it across the main floor alive. You're going to have to climb over the Police Procedurals bookcase, make your way past the cash register and stock returns, crawl under the Chicklit and then fight the last six feet to the Farquitt boxed set. It's a limited edition of one hundred--I will *never* get another chance like this!"

"This is lunacy, Miss Havisham!" I replied indignantly. "I will *not* fight over a set of Daphne Farquitt novels!"

Miss Havisham looked sharply at me as the muffled crack of a

small-caliber firearm sounded and there was the thud of a body falling.

"I thought as much!" she sneered. "A streak of yellow a mile wide all the way down your back! How did you think you were going to handle the *otherness* at Jurisdiction if you can't handle a few crazed fiction-fanciers hell bent on finding bargains? Your apprenticeship is at an end. Good day, Miss Next!"

"Wait! This is a *test*?"

"What did you think it was? Think someone like me with all the money I have *enjoys* spending my time fighting for books I can read for free in the library?"

I resisted the temptation to say "Well, yes" and answered instead: "Will you be okay here, ma'am?"

"I'll be fine," she replied, tripping up a man near us for no reason I could see. "Now go!"

I turned and crawled rapidly across the carpet, climbed over the Police Procedurals to just beyond the registers, where the sales assistants rang in the bargains with a fervor bordering on messianic. I crept past them, through the empty returns department, and dived under the Chicklit table to emerge a scant two yards from the Daphne Farquitt special editions display; by a miracle no one had yet grabbed the boxed set. And it was *very* discounted--down from PS300 to only PS50. I looked to my left and could see the Red Queen fighting her way through the crowd. She caught my eye and dared me to try and beat her. I took a deep breath and waded into the swirling maelstrom of popular-prose-induced violence. Almost instantly I was punched on the jaw and thumped in the kidneys; I cried out in pain and quickly withdrew. I met a woman next to the J. G. Farrell section who had a nasty cut above her eye; she told me in a concussed manner that the Major Archer character appeared in both *Troubles* and *The Singapore Grip*. I glanced to where the Red Queen was cutting a swath through the crowd, knocking people aside in her bid to beat me. She smiled triumphantly as she head-butted a woman who had tried to poke her in the eye with a silver-plated bookmark. I took a step forward to join the fray, then stopped, considered my condition for a moment and decided that perhaps pregnant women shouldn't get involved in bookshop brawls.

So instead I took a deep breath and yelled: "*Ms. Farquitt is signing copies of her books in the basement!*"

There was a moment's silence, then a mass exodus towards the stairs and escalators. The Red Queen, caught up in the crowd, was dragged unceremoniously away with them; in a few seconds the room was empty. Daphne Farquitt was notoriously private--I didn't think there was a fan of hers anywhere who wouldn't jump at the chance of

actually meeting her. I walked calmly up to the boxed set, picked it up and took it to the counter, paid and rejoined Miss Havisham behind the discounted Du Mauriers, where she was idly flicking through a copy of *Rebecca*. I showed her the books.

"Not bad," she said grudgingly. "Did you get a receipt?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And the Red Queen?"

"Lost somewhere between here and the basement."

A thin smile crossed Miss Havisham's lips, and I helped her to her feet. Together we walked slowly past the mass of squabbling book-bargainers and made for the exit.

"How did you manage it?" asked Miss Havisham.

"I told them Daphne Farquitt was signing in the basement."

"She is?" exclaimed Miss Havisham, turning to head off downstairs.

"No, no, no," I added, taking her by the arm and steering her to the exit. "That's just what I *told* them."

"Oh, I get it!" replied Havisham. "Very good indeed. Resourceful and intelligent. Mrs. Nakajima was quite right--I think you'll do as an apprentice after all."

She regarded me for a moment, making up her mind about something. Eventually she nodded, gave another rare smile and handed me a simple gold ring that slipped easily over my little finger.

"Here--this is for you. *Never take it off*. Do you understand?"

"Thank you, Miss Havisham, it's very pretty."

"Pretty nothing, Next. Save your gratitude for *real* favors, not baubles, my girl. Come along. I know of a very good bun shop in *Little Dorrit*--and I'm buying!"

Outside, paramedics were dealing with the casualties, many of them still clutching the remnants of the bargains for which they had fought so bravely. My car was gone--towed away, most likely--and we trotted as fast as we could on Miss Havisham's twisted ankle, round the corner of the building until--

"Not so fast!"

The officers who had chased us earlier were blocking our path.

"Looking for something? *This*, I suppose?"

My car was on the back of a low loader being taken away.

"We'll take the bus," I stammered.

"You'll take the car," corrected the police officer. "*My* car-- Hey! Where do you think *you're* going?"

He was talking to Miss Havisham, who had taken the Farquitt boxed set and walked into a small group of women to disguise her bookjump--back to *Great Expectations* or the bun shop in *Little Dorrit* or somewhere. I wished I could join her but my skills in these matters

were not really up to scratch. I sighed.

"We want some answers, Next," said the policeman in a grim tone.

"Listen, Rawlings, I don't know the lady very well. What did she say her name was? Dame-rouge?"

"It's *Havisham*, Next--but you know that, don't you? That 'lady' is *extremely* well known to the police--she's racked up seventy-four outrageously *serious* driving offenses in the past twenty-two years."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. In June she was clocked driving a chain-driven Liberty-engined Higham Special automobile at 171.5 MPH down the M4. It's not only irresponsible, it's--Why are you laughing?"

"No reason."

The officer stared at me.

"You seem to know her quite well, Next. Why does she do these things?"

"Probably," I replied, "because they don't have motorways where she comes from--or 27-liter Higham Specials."

"And where would that be, Next?"

"I have no idea."

"I could arrest you for helping the escape of an individual in custody."

"She wasn't arrested, Rawlings, you said so yourself."

"Perhaps not, but you are. In the car."

## 20.

### Yorrick Kaine

In 1983 the youthful Yorrick Kaine was elected leader of the Whigs, at that time a small and largely inconsequential party whose desire to put the aristocracy back in power and limit voting rights to homeowners had placed it on the outer edges of the political arena. A pro-Crimean stance coupled with a wish for British unification helped build nationalist support, and by 1985 the Whigs had three MPs in Parliament. They built their manifesto on populist tactics such as reducing the cheese duty and offering dukedoms as prizes on the National Lottery. A shrewd politician and clever tactician, Kaine was ambitious for power--in whatever way he could get it.

A.J.P. MILLINER,

*The New Whigs: From Humble Beginnings to Fourth Reich*

IT TOOK TWO HOURS for me to convince the police I wasn't going to tell them anything about Miss Havisham other than her address. Undeterred, they thumbed through a yellowed statute book and eventually charged me with a little-known 1621 law about *permissioning a horse and carte to be driven by personn of low moral turpithude*, but with the "horse and carte" bit crossed out and "car" written in instead--so you can see how desperate they were. I would have to go before the magistrate the following week. I started to sneak out of the building to go home, but--

"So there you are!"

I turned and hoped my groan wasn't audible.

"Hello, Cordelia."

"Thursday, are you okay? You look a bit bruised!"

"I got caught in a Fiction Frenzy."

"No more nonsense, now--I need you to meet the couple who won my competition."

"Do I have to?"

Flakk looked at me sternly.

"It's *very* advisable."

"Okay," I replied. "Where are they?"

"I'm--um--not sure," said Cordelia, biting her lip and looking at her watch. "They said they'd be here half an hour ago. Can you wait a few minutes?"

So we stood around for a bit, Cordelia looking at her watch and staring at the front door. After ten minutes of waiting and without her guests turning up, I made my excuses and nipped up to the Litera Tec's office.

"Thursday!" said Bowden as I entered. "I told Victor you had the flu. How did you get on in Osaka?"

"Pretty well, I think. I've been inside books *without* a Prose Portal. I can do it on my own--more or less."

"You're kidding."

"No," I told him, "Landen's almost as good as back. I've seen *The Trial* from the inside and have just been at the Swindon Booktastic closing-down sale with Miss Havisham."

"What's she like?" asked Bowden with interest.

"Odd--and don't ever let her drive. It seems there is something very like SpecOps-27 *inside* books--I've yet to figure it all out. How have things been out here?"

He showed me a copy of *The Owl*. The headline read: *New Play by Will Found in Swindon. The Mole* had the headline *Cardenio Sensation!* and *The Toad*, predictably enough, led with *Swindon Croquet Supremo Aubrey Jambe Found in Bath with Chimp*.

"So Professor Spoon authenticated it?"

"He did indeed," replied Bowden. "One of us should take the report up to Volescamper this afternoon. This is for you."

He handed me the bag of pinkish goo attached to a report from the SpecOps forensic labs. I thanked him and read the analysis of the slime Dad had given me with interest and confusion in equal measures.

"Sugar, fatty animal protein, calcium, sodium, maltodextrin, carboxy-methyl-cellulose, phenylalanine, complex hydrocarbon compounds and traces of chlorophyll."

I flicked to the back of the report but was none the wiser. Forensics had faithfully responded to my request for analysis-- but it told me nothing new.

"What does it mean, Bowd?"

"Search me, Thursday. They're trying to match the profile to known chemical compounds, but so far, nothing. Perhaps if you told us where you got it?"

"I don't think that would be safe. I'll drop the *Cardenio* report in to Volescamper--I'm keen to avoid Cordelia. Tell forensics that the future of the planet depends on them--that should help. I *have* to know what this pink stuff is."

I saw Cordelia waiting for me in the lobby with her two guests, who had finally, it seemed, turned up. Unluckily for them, Spike Stoker had been passing and Cordelia, eager to do *something* to amuse her competition winners, had obviously asked him to say a few words. The look of frozen jaw-dropping horror on her guests' faces said it all. I hid my face behind the *Cardenio* report and left Cordelia to it.

I blagged a ride in a squad car up to the crumbling but now far

busier Vole Towers. The mansion was besieged by the news stations, all keen to report any details regarding the discovery of *Cardenio*. Two dozen outside broadcast trucks were parked on the weed-infested gravel, all humming with activity. Dishes were trained into the afternoon sky, transmitting the pictures to an airship repeater station that had been routed in to bounce the stories live to the world's eager viewers. For security, SpecOps- 14 had been drafted in and stood languidly about, idly chatting to one another. Mostly, it seemed, about Aubrey Jambe's apparent indiscretion with the chimp.

"Hello, Thursday!" said a handsome young SO-14 agent at the front door. It was annoying; I didn't recognize him. People I didn't know hailing me as friends was something that had happened a lot since Landen's eradication; I supposed I would get used to it.

"Hello!" I replied to the stranger in an equally friendly tone. "What's going on?"

"Yorrick Kaine is heading a press conference."

"Really?" I asked, suddenly suspicious. "What's *Cardenio* got to do with him?"

"Hadn't you heard? Lord Volescamper has *given* the play to Yorrick Kaine and the Whig party!"

"Why would," I asked slowly, smelling a political rat of epic proportions, "Lord Volescamper have anything to do with a minor right-wing pro-Crimean Welsh-hater like Kaine?"

The SpecOps-14 agent shrugged. "Because he's a lord and wants to reclaim some lost power?"

At that moment two other SpecOps agents walked past, and one of them nodded to the young agent at the door and said: "All well, Miles?"

The dashing young SO-14 agent said that all was well, but he was wrong. All was *not* well--at least it wasn't for me. I'd thought I might bump into Miles Hawke eventually, but not unprepared, like this. I stared at him, hoping my shock and surprise wouldn't show. He had spent time in my flat and knew me a lot better than I knew him. My heart thumped inside my chest and I tried to say something intelligent and witty, but it came out more like:

"Asterfobulongus?"

He looked confused and leaned forward slightly.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Nothing."

"You seemed a bit upset when I called, Thursday. Is there a problem with our *arrangement*?"

I stared at him for a few seconds in numbed silence before mumbling: "No--no, not at all."

"Good!" he said. "We must fix a date or two."

"Yes," I said, running on auto-fear, "yes we must. *Gottogo*-- bye."

I trotted off before he could say anything else. I paused for breath outside the door to the library. Sooner or later I was going to have to ask him straight out. I decided on the face of it that later suited me better than sooner, so I walked through the heavy steel doors and into the library. Yorrick Kaine and Lord Volescamper were sitting behind a table, and beyond them was Mr. Swaike and two security guards who were standing on either side of the play itself, proudly displayed behind a sheet of bulletproof glass. The press conference was halfway through, and I tapped Lydia Startright--who happened to be standing quite near--on the arm.

"Hey, Lyds!" I said in a low whisper.

"Hey, Thursday," replied the reporter. "I heard you did the initial authentication. How good is it?"

"Very good," I replied. "Somewhere on par with *The Tempest*. What's happening here?"

"Volescamper has just officially announced he is *giving* the play to Yorrick Kaine and the Whigs."

"Why?"

"Who knows? Hang on, I want to ask a question."

Lydia stood up and raised her hand. Kaine pointed at her.

"What do you propose to do with the play, Mr. Kaine? We understand that there has been talk of offers in the region of a hundred million pounds."

"Good question," replied Yorrick Kaine, getting to his feet. "We in the Whig party thank Lord Volescamper for his kind generosity. I am of the opinion that *Cardenio* is not for one person or group to exploit, so we at the Whig party propose offering free licenses to perform the play to anyone who wishes to do so."

There was an excited babbling from the attendant journalists as they took this in. It was an act of unprecedented generosity, especially from Kaine, but more than that, it was the *right* thing to do, and the press suddenly warmed towards Yorrick. It was as if Kaine had never suggested the invasion of Wales two years ago or the reduction of the right to vote the year before; I was instantly suspicious.

There were several more questions about the play and a lot of well-practiced answers from Kaine, who seemed to have reinvented himself as a caring and sharing patriarch and not the extremist of yore. After the press conference had ended, I made my way to the front and approached Volescamper, who looked at me oddly for a moment.

"The Spoon report," I told him, handing him the buff-colored file, "about the authentication ... we thought you might want to see it."

"What? Of course!"



Volescamper took the report and glanced at it in a cursory manner before passing it to Kaine, who seemed to show more interest. Kaine didn't even look at me, but since I obviously wasn't going to leave like some message girl, Volescamper introduced me.

"Oh yes! Mr. Kaine, this is Thursday Next, SpecOps-27."

Kaine looked up from the report, his manner abruptly changed to one of charm and gushing friendship.

"Ms. Next, delighted!" he enthused. "I read of your exploits with great interest, and believe me, your intervention improved the narrative of *Jane Eyre* considerably!"

I wasn't impressed by him or his faux charm.

"Think you can change the Whig party's fortunes, Mr. Kaine?"

"The party is undergoing something of a restructuring at present," replied Kaine, fixing me with a serious stare. "Old ideology has been retired and the party now looks forward to a fresh look at England's political future. Rule by informed patriarch and voting restricted to responsible property owners is the future, Miss Next--ruling by committee has been the death of common sense for far too long."

"And Wales?" I asked. "Where do you stand on Wales these days?"

"Wales is historically part of greater Britain," announced Kaine in a slightly more guarded manner. "The Welsh have been flooding the English market with cheap goods, and this has to stop--but I have no plans *whatsoever* for forced unification."

I stared at him for a moment.

"You have to get in power first, Mr. Kaine."

The smile dropped from his face.

"Thank you for delivering the report, Miss Next," put in Volescamper hurriedly. "Can I offer you a drink or something before you go?"

I took the hint and made my way to the front door. I stood and looked at the outside broadcast units thoughtfully. Yorrick Kaine was playing his hand well.

## Les Artes Modernes de Swindon '85

The very Irreverent Joffy Next was the minister for the Global Standard Deity's first church in England. The GSD had a little bit of all religions, arguing that if there *was* one God, then He would really have very little to do with all the fluff and muddle down here on the material plane, and a streamlining of the faiths might very well be in His interest. Worshipers came and went as they pleased, prayed according to how they felt most happy, and mingled freely with other GSD members. It enjoyed moderate success, but what God actually thought of it no one ever really knew.

PROFESSOR M. BLESSINGTON, PR (ret.),  
*The Global Standard Deity*

**I**PAID TO HAVE my car released with a check that I felt sure would bounce, then drove home and had a snack and a shower before driving over to Wanborough and Joffy's first Les Artes Modernes de Swindon exhibition. Joffy had asked me for a list of my colleagues to boost the numbers, so I fully expected to see some work people there. I had even asked Cordelia, who I had to admit was great fun when not in PR mode. The art exhibition was being held in the Global Standard Deity church at Wanborough and had been opened by Frankie Saveloy a half hour before I arrived. It seemed quite busy as I stepped inside. All the pews had been moved out, and artists, critics, press and potential purchasers milled amongst the eclectic collection of art. I grabbed a glass of wine from a passing waiter, suddenly remembered I shouldn't be drinking, sniffed at it longingly and put it down again. Joffy, looking very smart indeed in a dinner jacket and dog collar, leapt forward when he saw me, grinning wildly.

"Hello, Doofus!" he said, hugging me affectionately. "Glad you could make it. Have you met Mr. Saveloy?"

Without waiting for an answer, he propelled me towards a puffy man who stood quite alone at the side of the room. He introduced me as quickly as he could and then legged it. Frankie Saveloy was the compere of *Name That Fruit!* and looked more like a toad in real life than he did on TV. I half expected a long sticky tongue to shoot out and capture a wayward fly, but I smiled politely nonetheless.

"Mr. Saveloy?" I said, offering my hand. He took it in his clammy mitt and held on to it tightly.

"Delighted!" grunted Saveloy, his eyes flicking to my cleavage. "I'm sorry we couldn't get you to appear on my show--but you're probably feeling quite honored to meet me, just the same."

"Quite the reverse," I assured him, retrieving my hand forcibly.

"Ah!" said Saveloy, grinning so much the sides of his mouth almost met his ears and I feared the top of his head might fall off. "I have my Rolls-Royce outside--perhaps you might like to join me for a ride?"

"I think," I replied, "that I would sooner eat rusty nails."

He didn't seem in the least put out. He grinned some more and said: "Shame to put such magnificent hooters to waste, Miss Next."

I raised my hand to slap him but my wrist was caught by Cordelia Flakk, who had decided to intervene.

"Up to your old tricks, Frankie?"

Saveloy grimaced at Cordelia.

"Damn you, Dilly--out to spoil my fun!"

"Come on, Thursday, there are plenty of bigger fools to waste your time on than this one."

Flakk had dropped the bright pink outfit for a more reserved shade but was still able to fog film at forty yards. She took me by the hand and steered me towards some of the art on display.

"You have been leading me around the houses a bit, Thursday," she said testily. "I only need ten minutes of your time with those guests of mine!"

"Sorry, Dilly. Things have been a bit hectic. Where are they?"

"Well," she replied, "they were *meant* to be both performing in *Richard III* at the Ritz."

"Meant to be?"

"They were late and missed curtain up. Can you *please* make time for them both tomorrow?"

"I'll try."

"Good."

We approached a small scrum where one of the featured artists was presenting his latest work to an attentive audience composed mostly of art critics who all wore collarless black suits and were scribbling notes in their catalogues.

"So," said one of the critics, gazing at the piece through his half-moon spectacles, "tell us all about it, Mr. Duchamp<sup>2924</sup>."

"I call it *The Id Within*," said the young artist in a quiet voice, avoiding everyone's gaze and pressing his fingertips together. He was dressed in a long black cloak and had sideburns cut so sharp that if he turned abruptly he would have had someone's eye out. He continued: "Like life, my piece reflects the many different layers that cocoon and restrict us in society today. The outer layer--reflecting yet counterpoising the harsh exoskeleton we all display--is hard, thin, yet somehow brittle--but beneath this a softer layer awaits, yet of the same shape and almost the same size. As one delves deeper one finds many different shells, each smaller yet no softer than the one before."

The journey is a tearful one, and when one reaches the center there is almost nothing there at all, and the similarity to the outer crust is, in a sense, illusory."

"It's an onion," I said in a loud voice.

There was a stunned silence. Several of the art critics looked at me, then at Duchamp<sup>2924</sup>, then at the onion.

I was sort of hoping the critics would say something like "I'd like to thank you for bringing this to our attention. We nearly made complete dopes of ourselves," but they didn't. They just said: "Is this true?"

To which Duchamp<sup>2924</sup> replied that this *was* true in *fact*, but untrue *representationally*, and as if to reinforce the fact he drew a bunch of shallots from within his jacket and added: "I have *here* another piece I'd like you to see. It's called *The Id Within II (Grouped)* and is a collection of concentric three-dimensional shapes locked around a central core . . ."

Cordelia pulled me away as the critics craned forward with renewed interest.

"You seem very troublesome tonight, Thursday," smiled Cordelia. "Come on, I want you to meet someone."

She introduced me to a young man with a well-tailored suit and well-tailored hair.

"This is Harold Flex," announced Cordelia. "Harry is Lola Vavoom's agent and a big cheese in the film industry."

Flex shook my hand gratefully and told me how *fantastically* humbled he was to be in my presence.

"Your story *needs* to be told, Miss Next," enthused Flex, "and Lola is *very* enthusiastic."

"Oh no," I said hurriedly, realizing what was coming. "No, no. Not in a million years."

"You should hear Harry out, Thursday," pleaded Cordelia. "He's the sort of agent who could cut a *really* good financial deal for you, do a fantastic PR job for SpecOps *and* make sure your wishes and opinions in the whole story were rigorously listened to."

"A movie?" I asked incredulously. "Are you nuts? Didn't you see *The Adrian Lush Show*? SpecOps and Goliath would pare the story to the bone!"

"We'd present it as *fiction*, Miss Next," explained Flex. "We've even got a title: *The Eyre Affair*. What do you think?"

"I think you're both out of your tiny minds. Excuse me."

I left Cordelia and Mr. Flex plotting their next move in low voices and went to find Bowden, who was staring at a dustbin full of paper cups.

"How can they present this as art?" he asked. "It looks just like a rubbish bin!"

"It is a rubbish bin," I replied. "That's why it's next to the refreshments table."

"Oh!" he said, then asked me how the press conference went.

"Kaine is fishing for votes," he told me when I had finished. "Got to be. A hundred million might buy you some serious air-time for advertising, but putting *Cardenio* in the public domain could sway the Shakespeare vote--that's one group of voters you can't buy."

I hadn't thought of this.

"Anything else?"

Bowden unfolded a piece of paper.

"Yes. I'm trying to figure out the running order for my stand-up comedy routine tomorrow night."

"How long is your slot?"

"Ten minutes."

"Let me see."

He had been trying out his routine on me, although I protested that I probably wasn't the best person to ask. Bowden himself didn't find any of the jokes funny, although he understood the technical process involved.

"I'd start off with the penguins on the ice floe," I suggested, looking at the list as Bowden made notes, "then move on to the pet centipede. Try the white horse in the pub next, and if that works well do the tortoise that gets mugged by the snails--but don't forget the voice. Then move on to the dogs in the waiting room at the vet's and finish with the one about meeting the gorilla."

"What about the lion and the baboon?"

"Good point. Use that instead of the white horse if the centipede goes flat."

Bowden made a note.

"Centipede . . . goes . . . flat. Got it. What about the man going bear hunting? I told that to Victor and he sprayed Earl Grey out of both nostrils at once."

"Keep it for an encore. It's three minutes long on its own-- but don't hurry; let it build. Then again, if your audience is middle-aged and a bit fuddy-duddy I'd drop the bear, baboon and the dogs and use the greyhound and the racehorses instead--or the one about the two Rolls-Royces."

"Canapes, darling?" said Mum, offering me a plate.

"Got any more of those prawny ones?"

"I'll go and see."

I followed her into the vestry, where she and several other members of the Women's Federation were getting food ready.

"Mum, Mum," I said, following her to where the profoundly deaf Mrs. Higgins was laying doilies on plates, "I must talk to you."

"I'm busy, sweetness."

"It's *very* important."

She stopped doing what she was doing, put everything down and steered me to the corner of the vestry, just next to a worn stone effigy, reputedly a follower of St. Zvlkx.

"What's the problem that's more important than canapes, oh daughter-my-daughter?"

"Well," I began, unsure of how to put it, "remember you said how you wanted to be a grandmother?"

"Oh *that*," she said, laughing and moving to get up. "I've known you had a bun in there for a while--I was just wondering when you were going to tell me."

"Wait a minute!" I said, feeling suddenly cheated. "You're meant to be all surprised and tearful."

"Done that, darling. Can I be so indelicate as to ask who the father is?"

"My husband's, I hope--and before you ask, the ChronoGuard eradicated him."

She pulled me into her arms and gave me a long hug.

"Now *that* I can understand. Do you ever see him in the sort of way I see your father?"

"No," I replied a bit miserably. "He's only in my memories."

"Poor little duck!" exclaimed my mother, giving me another hug. "But thank the Lord for small mercies--at least you got to remember him. Many of us never do--just vague feelings of something that might have been. You must come along to Eradications Anonymous with me one evening. Believe me, there are more Lost Ones than you might imagine."

I'd never really talked about Dad's eradication with my mother. All her friends had assumed my brothers and I had been fathered by youthful indiscretions. To my highly principled mother this had been almost as painful as Dad's eradication. I'm not really one for any organization with "anonymous" in the title, so I decided to backtrack slightly.

"How did you know I was pregnant?" I asked as she rested her hand on mine and smiled kindly.

"Spot it a mile off. You've been eating like a horse and staring at babies a lot. When Mrs. Pilchard's little cousin Henry came round last week you could hardly keep your hands off him."

"Aren't I like that usually?"

"Not even remotely. You're filling out along the bustline too--that dress has never looked so good on you. When's sprogging time? July?"

I paused as a wave of despondency washed over me, brought about by the sheer inevitability of motherhood. When I first knew about it

Landen had been with me and everything seemed that much easier.

"Mum, what if I'm no good at it? I don't know the first thing about babies. I've spent my working life chasing after bad guys. I can field-strip an M-16 blindfold, replace an engine in an APC and hit a twopence piece from thirty yards eight times out of ten. I'm not sure a cot by the fireside is really my sort of thing."

"It wasn't mine either," confided my mother, smiling kindly. "It's no accident that I'm a dreadful cook. Before I met your father and had you and your brothers I worked at SO-3. Still do, on occasions."

"You didn't meet him on a day trip to Portsmouth then?" I asked slowly, wondering whether I really wanted to hear what I was hearing.

"Not at all. It was in another place *entirely*."

"SO-3?"

"You'd never believe me if I told you, so I'm not going to. But the point is, I was very happy to have children when the time came. Despite all your ceaseless bickering when you were kids and teenage grumpiness, it's been a wonderful adventure. Losing Anton was a storm cloud for a bit, but on balance it's been good--better than SpecOps any day." She paused for a moment. "But I was the same as you, worrying about not being ready, about being a bad mother. How did I do?"

She stared at me and smiled kindly.

"You did good, Mum."

I hugged her tightly.

"I'll do what I can to help, sweetness, but strictly no nappies or potty training, and Tuesday and Thursday evenings are *right out*."

"SO-3?"

"No," she replied, "bridge and skittles."

She handed me a handkerchief and I dabbed at my eyes.

"You'll be fine, sweetness."

"Thanks, Mum."

She bustled off, muttering something about having a million mouths to feed. I watched her leave, smiling to myself. I thought I knew my mother but I didn't. Children rarely know their parents at all.

"Thursday!" said Joffy as I reappeared from the vestry. "What use are you if you don't mingle? Will you take that wealthy Flex fellow to meet Zorf, the neanderthal artist? I'd be ever so grateful. Oh my goodness!" he muttered, staring at the church door. "It's Aubrey Jambe!"

And so it was. Mr. Jambe, Swindon's croquet captain, *despite* his recent indiscretion with the chimp, was still attending functions as though nothing had happened.

"I wonder if he's brought the chimp?" I said, but Joffy flashed me an angry look and rushed off to press flesh. I found Cordelia and Mr. Flex discussing the merits of a minimalist painting by Welsh artist Tegwyn Wedimedr that was so minimalist it wasn't there at all. They were staring at a blank wall with a picture hook on it.

"What does it say to you, Harry?"

"It says . . . *nothing*, Cords--but in a very different way. How much is it?"

Cordelia bent forward to look at the price tag.

"It's called *Beyond Satire* and it's twelve hundred pounds; quite a snip. Hello, Thursday! Changed your mind about the book-flick?"

"Nope. Have you met Zorf, the neanderthal artist?"

I guided them over to where Zorf was exhibiting. Some of his friends were with him, one of whom I recognized--it was Stiggins of SpecOps-13.

"Good evening, Stig."

He nodded his head politely and introduced me to a younger neanderthal who was dressed in a boiler suit that was almost completely covered in different-colored blobs of paint.

"Good evening, Thursday," returned Stig. "This is our friend Zorf." The younger neanderthal shook my hand as I explained who Harry and Cordelia were.

"Well, this is a *very* interesting painting, Mr. Zorf," said Harry, staring at a mass of green, yellow and orange paint on a six-foot-square canvas. "What does it represent?"

"Is not obvious?" replied the neanderthal.

"Of course!" said Harry, turning his head this way and that. "It's daffodils, isn't it?"

"No."

"A sunset?"

"No."

"Field of barley?"

"No."

"I give up."

"Closest yet, Mr. Flex. If you have to ask, then you *never* understand. To neanderthal, sunset is only finish-day. Van Gogh's *Green Rye* is merely poor depiction of a field. The only sapien painters we truly understand are Pollock and Kandinsky; they speak our language. Our paintings are not for you."

I looked at the small gathering of neanderthals who were staring at Zorf's abstract paintings with wonderment. But Harry, a bullshitter to the end, had not yet given up hope.

"Can I have another guess?" he asked Zorf, who nodded.

He stared at the canvas and screwed up his eyes.



"It's a--"

"Hope," said a voice close by. "It's hope. Hope for the future of neanderthal. It is the fervent wish--for *children*."

Zorf and all the other neanderthals turned to stare at the speaker. It was Granny Next.

"*Exactly* what I was about to say," said Flex, fooling no one but himself.

"The esteemed lady shows understanding beyond her species," said Zorf, making a small grunting noise that I took to be laughter. "Would lady sapien like to add to our painting?"

This was indeed an honor. Granny Next stepped forward, took the proffered brush from Zorf, mixed a subtle shade of turquoise and made a few fine brushstrokes to the left of center. There was a gasp from the neanderthals, and the women in the group hastily placed veils over their faces while the men-- including Zorf--raised their heads and stared at the ceiling, humming quietly. Gran did likewise. Flex, Cordelia and I looked at one another, confused and ignorant of neanderthal customs. After a while the staring and humming stopped, the women raised their veils and they all ambled slowly over to Gran and smelled her clothes and touched her face gently with their large hands. Within a few minutes it was all over; the neanderthals returned to their seats and were staring at Zorf's paintings again.

"Hello, young Thursday!" said Gran, turning to me. "Let's find somewhere quiet to have a chat!"

We walked off towards the church organ and sat on a pair of hard plastic chairs.

"What did you paint on his picture?" I asked her, and Gran smiled her sweetest smile.

"Something a bit controversial," she confided, "yet *supportive*. I have worked with neanderthals in the past and know many of their ways and customs. How's hubby?"

"Still eradicated," I said glumly.

"Never mind," said Gran seriously, touching my chin so I would look into her eyes. "*Always* there is hope. You'll find, as I did, that it's really *very* funny the way things turn out."

"I know. Thanks, Gran."

"Your mother will be a tower of strength--never be in any doubt of that."

"She's here if you want to see her."

"No, no," said Gran hurriedly, "I expect she's a little busy. While we're here," she went on, changing the subject without drawing breath, "can you think of any books that might be included in the 'ten most boring classics'? I'm about ready to go."

"Gran!"

"Indulge me, young Thursday!"

I sighed.

"How about *Paradise Lost*?"

Gran let out a loud groan.

"Awful! I could hardly walk for a week afterwards--it's enough to put anyone off religion for good!"

"*Ivanhoe*?"

"Pretty dull but redeemable in places. It isn't in the top ten, I think."

"*Moby-Dick*?"

"Excitement and action interspersed with mind-numbing dullness. Read it twice."

"*A la recherche du temps perdu*?"

"English or French, its sheer tediousness is undiminished."

"*Pamela*?"

"Ah! Now you're talking. Struggled through *that* when a teenager. It might have had resonance in 1741, but today the only resonance it possesses is the snores that emanate from those deluded enough to attempt it."

"How about *A Pilgrim's Progress*?"

But Gran's attention had wandered.

"You have visitors, my dear. Look over there past the stuffed squid inside the piano and just next to the Fiat 500 carved from frozen toothpaste."

There were two people in ill-fitting dark suits who looked very out of place. They were clearly SpecOps but *not* Dedmen and Walken. It looked as though SO-5 had suffered another mishap. I asked Gran if she would be all right on her own and walked across to meet them. I found them looking dubiously at a flattened tuba on the ground entitled *The Indivisible Thriceness of Death*.

"What do you think?" I asked them.

"I don't know," began the first agent nervously. "I'm . . . I'm . . . not really up on art."

"Even if you were, it wouldn't help here," I replied dryly. "SpecOps-5?"

"Yes, how did--"

He checked himself quickly and rummaged for a pair of dark glasses.

"I mean, *no*. Never heard of SpecOps, much less SpecOps-5. Don't exist. Oh *blast*. I'm not very good at this, I'm afraid."

"We're looking for someone named Thursday Next," said his partner in a very obvious whisper from the side of her mouth, adding, in case I didn't get the message, "*Official* business."

I sighed. Obviously, SO-5 were beginning to run out of volunteers. I wasn't surprised.

"What happened to Dedmen and Walken?" I asked them.

"They were--" began the first agent but the second nudged him in the ribs and announced instead:

"Never heard of them."

"I'm Thursday Next," I told them, "and I think you're in more danger than you realize. Where did they get you from? SO-14?"

They took their sunglasses off and looked at me nervously.

"I'm from SO-22," said the first. "The name's Lamme. This is Slorter; she's from--"

"--SO-28," said the woman. "Thank you, Blake, I can talk, you know--and let me handle this. You can't open your mouth without putting your foot in it."

Lamme sank into a sulky silence.

"SO-28? You're an income tax assessor?"

"So what if I am?" retorted Slorter defiantly. "We all have to risk things for advancement."

"I know that only too well," I replied, steering them towards a quiet spot next to a model of a matchstick made entirely out of bits of the houses of Parliament. "Just so long as you know what you're getting into. What happened to Walken and Dedmen?"

"They were reassigned," explained Lamme.

"You mean dead?"

"No," exclaimed Lamme with some surprise. "I mean reas-- Oh my goodness! Is *that* what it means?"

I sighed. These two weren't going to last the day.

"Your predecessors are both dead, guys--and the ones before that. Four agents gone in less than a week. What happened to Walken's case notes? Accidentally destroyed?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" laughed Lamme. "When recovered they were *totally* intact--they were then put through the shredder by a new member of staff who mistook it for a photocopier."

"Do you have *anything at all* to go on?"

"As soon as they realized it was a shredder, I--sorry, *they* stopped and we were left with these."

He handed two half documents over. One was a picture of a young woman striding out of a shop laden down with carrier bags and parcels. Her face, tantalizingly enough, was the part that had been destroyed by the shredder. I turned the picture over. On the back was a penciled note: "A.H. leaves Dorothy Perkins having shopped with a stolen credit card."

"The 'A.H.' means Acheron Hades," explained Lamme in a confident tone. "We were allowed to read part of his file. He can lie in thought, deed and action."

"I know. I wrote it. But this *isn't* Hades. Acheron doesn't resolve on

film."

"Then who is it that we're after?" asked Slorter.

"I have no idea. What was on the other document?"

This was simply a handwritten page of notes, compiled by Walken about whoever it was they were watching. I read:

"... 9:34: Contact with suspect at Camp Hopson sales. 11:03: Elevenses of carrot juice and flapjack--leaves without paying. 11:48: Dorothy Perkins. 12:57: Lunch. 14:45: Continues shopping. 17:20: Argues with manager of Tammy Girl about returned leg warmers. 17:45: Lost contact. 21:03: Reestablished contact at the HotBox nightclub. 23:02: A.H. leaves the HotBox with male companion. 23:16: Contact lost. . . ."

I put down the sheet.

"It's not exactly how I'd describe the work of a master criminal, now is it?"

"No," replied Slorter glumly.

"What were your orders?"

"Classified," announced Lamme, who was getting the hang of SpecOps-5 work, right at the point I didn't want him to.

"Stick to you like glue," said Slorter, who understood the situation a lot better, "and reports every half hour sent to SO-5 HQ in three separate ways."

"You're being used as live bait," I told them. "If I were you I'd go back to SO-23 and -28 just as quick as your legs can carry you."

"And miss all this?" asked Slorter, replacing her dark glasses and looking every bit the part. SO-5 would be the highest office for either of them. I hoped they lived long enough to enjoy it.

By ten-thirty the exhibition was pretty much over. I sent Gran home in a cab fast asleep and a bit tipsy. Saveloy tried to kiss me goodnight but I was too quick for him, and Duchamp<sup>2924</sup> had managed to sell an installation of his called *The Id Within VII-- in a Jar, Pickled*. Zorf refused to sell any paintings to anyone who couldn't see what they were, but to neanderthals who *could* see what they were he gave them away, arguing that the bond between a painting and an owner should not be sullied by anything as obscenely sapient as cash. The flattened tuba was sold too, the new owner asking Joffy to drop it round to him, and if he wasn't at home to just slip it under the door. I went home via Mum's place to collect Pickwick, who hadn't come out of the airing cupboard the entire time I was in Osaka.

"She insisted on being fed in there," explained my mother, "and the trouble with the other dodos! Let one in and they *all* want to follow!"

She handed me Pickwick's egg wrapped in a towel. Pickwick hopped up and down in a very aggravated manner and I had to show her the

egg to keep her happy, then we both drove home to my apartment at the same sedate twenty miles per hour and the egg was safely placed in the linen cupboard with Pickwick sitting on it in a cross mood, very fed up with being moved about.

## 22.

### Travels with My Father

The first time I went traveling with my father was when I was much younger. We attended the opening night of *King Lear* at the Globe in 1602. The place was dirty and smelly and slightly rowdy, but for all that, not unlike a lot of other opening nights I had attended. We bumped into someone named Bendix Scintilla, who was, like my father, a lonely traveler in time. He said he hung around in Elizabethan England to avoid ChronoGuard patrols. Dad said later that Scintilla had been a truly great fighter for the cause but his drive had left him when they eradicated his best friend and partner. I knew how he felt but did not do as he did.

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*Private Diaries*

DAD TURNED UP for breakfast. I was just flicking through that morning's copy of *The Toad* at the kitchen table when he arrived. The big news story was the volte-face in Yorrick Kaine's fortunes. From being a sad politically dead no-hoper he was polling ahead of the ruling Teafurst party. The power of Shakespeare. The world suddenly stopped, the picture on the TV froze up and the sound became a dull hum, the same tone and pitch as it was the moment Dad arrived. He had the power to stop the clock like this; time ground to a halt when he visited me. It was a hard-won skill--for him there was no return to normality.

"Hello, Dad," I said brightly. "How are things?"

"Well, it depends," he replied. "Have you heard of Winston Churchill yet?"

"Not yet."

"Blast!" he muttered, sitting down and raising his eyebrows at the newspaper headline: *Chimp Merely Pet, Claims Croquet Supremo*. "How's your mother?"

"She's well. Is the world still going to end next week?"

"Looks like it. Does she ever talk about me?"

"All the time. I got this report from SpecOps forensics."

"Hmm," said my father, donning his glasses and reading the report carefully. "Carboxy-methyl-cellulose, phenylalanine and hydrocarbons. Animal fat? Doesn't make any sense at all!"

He handed back the report.

"I don't get it," he said quietly, sucking the end of his spectacles. "That cyclist lived and the world *still* ended. Maybe it's not him. Trouble is, nothing else happened at that particular time and place."

"Yes it did," I said in a sober voice.

"What?"

I picked up the evidence bag with the pink goo inside.

"You gave me this."

Dad snapped his fingers.

"That must be it. My handing you the bag of slime was the key event and *not* the death of the cyclist. Did you tell anyone where that pink goo came from?"

"No one."

He thought for a bit.

"Well," he said at last, "unlike hindsight, avoiding Armageddons is not an exact science. We may have to let events lead us for a while until we can figure it out. How is everything else going?"

"Goliath eradicated Landen," I replied glumly.

"Who?"

"My husband."

"Oh!" he said, suddenly thoughtful. "Any particular reason?"

"Goliath want Jack Schitt out of 'The Raven.' "

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "The old blackmail routine. I'm sorry to hear that, sweetpea. But listen, don't be downhearted. We have a saying about reactualizing eradicatees that goes like this: 'No one is truly dead until they are forgotten.' "

"So," I answered slowly, "if I forgot about him, then he *would* be gone?"

"Precisely," remarked my father, helping himself to some coffee. "That's why I'm having so much trouble reactualizing Churchill and Nelson--I have to find someone who remembers them as they were so I can figure out where things might have gone awry." He laughed for a moment and then got up.

"Well, get dressed, we're leaving!"

"Where to?"

"Where?" he exclaimed. "Why, to get your husband back, of course!"

This *was* good news. I quickly dashed into the bedroom to pull some clothes on while Dad read the paper and had a bowl of cereal.

"Schitt-Hawse told me they had the summer of 1947 sewn up so tight not even a transtemporal gnat could get in there," I told him, breathless from preparation.

"Then," replied my father thoughtfully, "we will have to outsmart them! They will expect us to arrive at the right time and the right place--but we won't. We'll arrive at the right place but at the *wrong* time, then simply wait. Worth a try, wouldn't you say?"

I smiled.

"Definitely!"

I was conscious of a series of rapid flashes and there we were in a blacked-out Humber Snipe, driving alongside a dark strip of water on

a moonlit night. In the distance I could see searchlights crisscross the sky and the distant thump-thump-thump of a bombing raid.

"Where are we?" I asked.

Dad changed down a gear.

"Approaching Henley-on-Thames in occupied England, November 1946."

I looked out at the river again, an uncomfortable feeling starting to develop in the pit of my stomach.

"Is this . . . is this where Landen--you know--in the car accident?"

"This is *where* it happens, but not *when*. If I were to jump straight there, Lavoisier would be on to us like a shot. Ever played Kick the Can?"

"Sure."

"It's a bit like that. Guile, stealth, patience--and a small amount of cheating. Okay, we're here."

We had reached an area of the road where there was a sharp bend. I could see how an inattentive motorist might easily misjudge the road and end up in the river. I shivered.

We got out and Dad walked across the road to where a small group of silver birches stood amidst a tangle of dead bracken and brambles. It was a good place to observe the bend in the road; we were barely ten yards away. Dad laid down a plastic carrier bag he had brought and we sat on the grass, leaning up against the smooth bark of a large birch.

"Now what?"

"We wait for six months."

"*Six months?* Dad, are you crazy? We can't sit here for six months!"

"So little time, so much to learn," mused my father. "Do you want a sandwich? Your mother leaves them out for me every morning. I'm not mad keen on corned beef and custard, but it has a sort of eccentric charm--and it does fill a hole."

"Six months?" I repeated.

He took a bite from his sandwich.

"Lesson one in time travel, Thursday. First of all, we are *all* time travelers. The vast majority of us manage only one day per day. Now if we accelerate ourselves like so--"

The clouds gathered speed above our heads and the trees shook faster in the light breeze; by the light of the moon I could see that the pace of the river had increased dramatically; a convoy of lorries sped past us in sudden accelerated movement.

"This is about twenty days per day--every minute compressed into about three seconds. Any slower and we would be visible. As it is, an outside observer might *think* he saw a man and woman sitting at the bottom of these trees, but if he looked again we would be gone. Ever



thought you saw someone, then looked again only to find them gone?"

"Sure."

"ChronoGuard traffic moving through, most likely."

The dawn was breaking and presently a German Wehrmacht patrol found our abandoned car and dashed around looking for us before a breakdown truck appeared and took the car away. More cars rushed along the road and the clouds sped rapidly across the sky.

"Pretty, isn't it?" said my father. "I miss all this, but I have so little time these days. At fifty daypers we would still have to wait a good three or four days for Landen's accident; I've a dental appointment, so we're going to have to pick it up a bit."

The clouds sped faster; cars and pedestrians were nothing more than blurs. The shadow of the trees cast by the sun traversed rapidly and lengthened in the afternoon sun; pretty soon it was evening and the clouds were tinged with pink before the rapidly gathering gloom overtook the day and the stars appeared, followed by the moon, which arced rapidly across the sky. The stars spun around the pole star as the sky grew bluer with the early dawn and the sun began its rapid climb in the east.

"Eight and one-half thousand daypers," explained my father. "This is my favorite bit. Watch the leaves!"

The sun now rose and set in under ten seconds. Pedestrians were invisible to us as we were to them, and a car had to be parked for at least two hours for us to see it at all. But the leaves! They turned from green to brown as we watched, the outer branches a blur of movement, the river a soft undulating mirror without so much as a ripple. The plants died off as we watched, the sky grew more overcast and the spells of dark were now much longer than the light. Flecks of light showed along the road where traffic moved, and opposite us an abandoned Kubelwagen was rapidly stripped of spares and then dumped upside down in the river.

"I'd never get bored of this, Dad. Do you travel like this all the time?"

"Never this slow. This is just for tourists. We usually approach speeds of ten billion or more daypers; if you want to go backwards you have to go faster still!"

"Go backwards by going forwards faster?" I queried, confounded by the illogicality of it.

"That's enough for now, sweetpea. Just enjoy yourself and watch."

I pulled myself closer to him as the air grew chilly and a heavy blanket of snow covered the road and forest around us.

"Happy New Year," said my father.

"Snowdrops!" I cried in delight as green shoots nuzzled through the snow and flowered, their heads angling towards the low sun. Then the

snow was gone and the river rose again and small amounts of detritus gathered around the upturned Kubelwagen, which rusted as we watched. The sun flashed past us higher and higher in the sky and soon there were daffodils and crocuses.

"Ah!" I said in surprise as a shoot from a small shrub started to grow up my trouser leg.

"Train them *away* from your body," explained my father, diverting the course of a bramble trying to ensnare him with the palm of his hand. My own shoot pushed against my hand like a small green worm and moved off in another direction. I did the same with the others that threatened me, but Dad went one further and with a practiced hand trained his bramble into a pretty bow.

"I've known students literally rooted to the spot," explained my father. "It's where the phrase comes from. But it can be fun, too. We had an operative named Jekyll who once trained a four-hundred-year-old oak into a heart as a present for her boyfriend."

The air was warmer now, and as my father checked his chronograph again we started to decelerate. The six months we had spent there had passed in barely thirty minutes. By the time we had returned to one day per day, it was night again.

"I don't see anyone, do you?" he hissed.

I looked around; the road was deserted. I opened my mouth to speak but he put a finger to his lips. At that moment a Morris 8 saloon appeared around the corner and drove rapidly down the road. It swerved to avoid a fox, skidded sideways off the road and landed upside down in the river. I wanted to get up, but my father held me with a pinched grip. The driver of the car--who I assumed was Bildden--broke the surface of the river, then quickly dived back to the car and resurfaced a few moments later with a woman. He dragged her to the bank and was just about to return to the submerged vehicle when a tall man in a greatcoat appeared from nowhere and placed his hand on Bildden's arm.

"Now!" said my father and we dashed from the safety of the copse.

"Leave him!" yelled my father. "Leave him to do what he has to do!"

My father grabbed the interloper, and with a sharp cry the man vanished. Bildden looked confused and made a run for the river, but in a few short moments a half-dozen ChronoGuard had dropped in, Lavoisier amongst them. One of the agents rugby-tackled Landen's father before he could return to rescue Landen. I yelled, "**NO!**" and pulled out my gun and aimed it at the man who held Bildden.

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The next thing I knew I was disarmed, sitting on the ground and feeling shocked and disoriented after my brief enloopment. It was how I imagine a stuck record might feel. Two SO-12 operatives stared at me while my father and Lavoisier talked in angry voices close by. Billden was breathing heavily and sobbing into the damp earth, holding his still-unconscious wife.

"Bastards!" I spat. "My husband's in there!"

"So much to learn," muttered Lavoisier as I got to my feet and stood by my father's side. "The infant Parke-Laine is *not* your husband, he is an accident statistic--or not. It rather depends on your father."

"A lackey for the Goliath Corporation, Lavoisier?" said Dad quietly. "You disappoint me."

"Greater need prevails, Colonel. If you'd handed yourself in I wouldn't have had to take these extreme measures. Besides, the ChronoGuard can't function without corporate sponsorship."

"And in return you do a few favors?"

"As I said, greater needs prevail. And before you start waving charges of corruption at me, this combined Goliath/Chrono-Guard operation has been fully sanctioned by the Chamber. Now, it's so simple even you can understand it. Give yourself up and your daughter can have her husband back--whether or not she decides to help Goliath. As you can see, I am in a *very* generous mood."

I looked at Dad and saw him bite his lip. He rubbed his temples and sighed. He had spent years fighting corruption in the ChronoGuard, and despite Landen's being so close to reactualization, I wasn't going to see Dad lose his liberty over either of us. What had he said?--"No one is truly dead until they are forgotten." Landen was still strong in my memory--we *would* have another chance.

As Dad opened his mouth to reluctantly agree, I said: "No."

"What?" exclaimed Lavoisier.

"No," I repeated. "Dad, don't do it--I'll get Jack Schitt out-- or *something!*"

Dad smiled and rested his hand on my shoulder.

"Bah!" went Lavoisier. "Each as hideously self-righteous as the other!"

He nodded to his men, who raised their weapons. But Dad was quick. I felt him grasp my shoulder tightly and we were off. The sun rose quickly as we leapt forward in time, leaving Lavoisier and the others several hours away before they realized what had happened.

"Let's see if we can lose him!" muttered my father. "As for that Chamber stuff--bullshit. Landen's eradication was murder, pure and simple. In fact, it's just the sort of information I need to bring Lavoisier down!"

Days amounted to no more than brief flashes of alternate dark and light as we hurtled into the future. But the odd thing was, we didn't actually move physically from the place we were standing. The world just aged about us.

"We're not at full speed," Dad explained. "He might overtake me without thinking. Keep an eye out for--"

Lavoisier and his cronies appeared for no more than the briefest glimpse as they moved past us into the future. Dad stopped abruptly and I staggered slightly as we returned to real time. We moved off the road as a fifties-style truck drove past, horn blaring.

"What now?"

"I think we shook him off. Blast--!"

We were off again--Lavoisier had reappeared. We lost him for a moment but pretty soon he was back again, keeping pace with us, matching our speed as we moved through history. As Dad slowed down slightly, so did Lavoisier. As he accelerated, Lavoisier did the same. It was like a transtemporal game of follow the leader.

"I'm too old to fall for that one!" smiled Lavoisier.

Soon after, two of his cronies reappeared as each one found us and matched the speed we were moving through time.

"I knew you'd come," said Lavoisier triumphantly, walking towards us slowly as the time flashed past, faster and faster. A new road was built where we were standing, then a bridge, houses, shops. "Give

yourself up. You'll have a fair trial, believe me."

The two other ChronoGuard operatives grabbed my father and held him tightly.

"I'll see you hang for this, Lavoisier! The Chamber would *never* sanction such an action. Give Landen back his life and I promise you I will say nothing."

"Well, that's just it, isn't it?" replied Lavoisier scornfully. "Who do you think they're going to believe? You, with your record, or me, third in command at the ChronoGuard? Besides, your clumsy attempt to get Landen back has covered any tracks I might have made getting rid of him!"

Lavoisier aimed his gun at my father. The two ChronoGuards held on to Dad tightly to stop him accelerating away, and we buffeted slightly as he tried. Things, to say the least, looked bad. From the makes of the cars on the road I could see we were approaching the early eighties. It wouldn't be long before we arrived at 1985. I had a sudden thought. Wasn't there ChronoGuard industrial action happening sometime soon?

"Say," I said, "do you guys cross picket lines?"

The ChronoGuard agents looked at each other, then at the chronographs on their wrists, then at Lavoisier. The taller of the two was the first to speak.

"She's right, Mr. Lavoisier, sir. I don't mind bullying and killing innocents, and I'll follow you beyond the crunch *normally*, but--"

"But what?" asked Lavoisier angrily.

"--but I *am* a loyal TimeGuild member. I don't cross picket lines."

"Neither do I," replied the other agent, nodding to his friend. "Likewise and truly."

Lavoisier smiled engagingly.

"Listen here, guys, I'll *personally* pay--"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lavoisier," replied the operative with a hint of indignation, "but we've been instructed not to enter into any individual contracts."

And in an instant they were gone as December arrived and the world turned pink. What had once been the road was now a few inches of the same pink slime that Dad had shown me. We were beyond the 12th December 1985, and where before there had been growth, change, seasons, clouds, now there was nothing but a never-ending landscape of shiny opaque curd.

"Saved by industrial action!" said Dad, laughing. "Tell *that* to your friends at the Chamber!"

"Bravo," replied Lavoisier wryly. He lowered his pistol. Without his cronies to hold on to Dad and stop him escaping, there was little he could do. "Bravo. I think we should just say *au revoir*, my friends--until

we meet again."

"Do we have to make it *au revoir*?" I asked. "What's wrong with *goodbye*?"

He didn't have time to answer as I felt Dad tense and we accelerated faster through the timestream. The pink slime was washed away, leaving only earth and rocks, and as I watched, the river moved away from us, meandered off into the flood plain and then swept under our feet and undulated back and forth like a snake before finally being replaced by a lake. We moved faster, and soon I could see the earth start to buckle as the crust bent and twisted under the force of plate tectonics. Plains dropped to make seas and mountains rose in their place. New vegetation reestablished itself as millions of years swept past in a matter of seconds. Vast forests grew and fell. We were covered, then uncovered, then covered again, now in a sea, now inside rock, now surrounded by an ice sheet, now a hundred feet in the air. More forests, then a desert, then mountains rose rapidly in the east, only to be scoured flat a few moments later.

"Well," said my father as we traveled through time, "Lavoisier in the pocket of Goliath. Who'd have thought it?"

"Dad?" I asked as the sun grew visibly bigger and redder. "How do we get back?"

"We don't go back," he replied. "We *can't* go back. Once the present has happened, that's it. We just carry on going until we return to where we started. Sort of like a roundabout. Miss an exit and you have to drive around again. There are just a few more exits and the roundabout is much, much, bigger."

"How much bigger?"

"A lot."

"How *much* of a lot?" I persisted.

"A lot of a lot. Quiet now--we're nearly there!"

And all of a sudden we weren't *nearly* there, we *were* there, back at breakfast in my apartment, Dad turning the pages of the newspaper and me running out from my bedroom having just got dressed. I stopped in mid-stride and sat down at the table, feeling deflated.

"Well, we tried, didn't we?" said my father.

"Yes Dad," I replied, staring at the floor, "we did. Thanks."

"Don't worry," he said kindly. "Even the finest eradications leave *something* behind for us to reactualize from. There is always a way--we just have to find it. Sweetpea, we *will* get him back--I'm not having my grandchild without a father."

His determination did reassure me, and I thanked him.

"Good!" he said, closing his newspaper. "By the way, did you manage to get any tickets for the Nolan Sisters concert?"

"I'm working on it."

"Good show. Well, time waits for no man, as we say--"

He squeezed my hand and was gone. The world started up again, the TV came back on, and there was a muffled plocking from Pickwick, who had managed to lock herself in the airing cupboard again. I let her out and she ruffled her feathers in an embarrassed fashion before going off in search of her water dish.

I went in to work, but there was precious little to do. We had a call from an enraged Mrs. Hathaway<sup>34</sup>, demanding to know when we were going to arrest the *unlick'd bear-whelp* who had cheated her, and another from a student who wanted to know whether we thought Hamlet's line was *this too too solid flesh* or *this too too sullied flesh*, or even perhaps *this two-toed swordfish*. Bowden spent the morning mouthing the lines for his routine, and by noon there had been two attempts to steal *Cardenio* from Vole Towers. Nothing serious; SO-14 had doubled the guard. This didn't concern SpecOps-27 in any way, so I spent the afternoon surreptitiously reading the Jurisdiction instruction manual, which felt a little like flicking through a girls' magazine during school. I was tempted to have a go at entering a work of fiction to try out a few of their "handy bookjumping tips" (page 28), but Havisham had roundly forbidden me from doing anything of the sort until I was more experienced. By the time I was ready to go home I had learned a few tricks about emergency book evacuation procedures (page 34) and read about the aims of the Bowdlerizers (page 62), who were a group of well-meaning yet censorious individuals hell bent on removing obscenities from fiction. I also read about Heathcliff's unexpected three-year career in Hollywood under the name of Buck Stallion and his eventual return to the pages of *Wuthering Heights* (page 71), the forty-six abortive attempts to illegally save Beth from dying in *Little Women* (page 74), details of the Character Exchange Program (page 81), using holorimic verse to flush out renegade book people, or PageRunners as they were known (page 96), and how to use spelling mistakes, misprints and double negatives to signal to other PROs in case emergency book evacuation procedures (page 34) failed (page 105). But there weren't only pages of instructions. The last ten or so pages featured hollowed-out recesses which contained devices that were far too deep to have fitted in the book. One of the pages contained a device similar to a flare gun which had "Mk IV TextMarker" written on its side. Another page had a glass panel covering a handle like a fire alarm. A note painted on the glass read: *IN UNPRECEDENTED EMERGENCY\* BREAK GLASS*. The asterisk, I noted somewhat chillingly, related to the footnote: *\*Please note: personal destruction does NOT count as an unprecedented emergency*. I was just learning about writing brief

descriptions of where you are by hand to enable you to get back (page 136) when it was time to clock off. I joined the general exodus and wished Bowden good luck with his routine. He didn't seem in the least nervous, but then he rarely did.

I got home to find my landlord on my doorstep. He looked around to make sure Miss Havisham was nowhere in sight, then said: "Time's up, Next."

"You said Saturday," I replied, unlocking the door.

"I said Friday," countered the man.

"How about I give you the money on Monday when the banks open?"

"How about if I take that dodo of yours and you live rent-free for three months?"

"How about you stick it in your ear?"

"It doesn't pay to be impertinent to your landlord, Next. Do you have the money or not?"

I thought quickly.

"No--but you said Friday, and it's not the end of Friday yet. In fact, I've got over six hours to find the cash."

He looked at me, looked at Pickwick, who had popped her head round the door to see who it was, then at his watch.

"Very well," he said. "But you'd better have the cash to me by midnight sharp or there'll be *serious* trouble."

And with a last withering look, he left me alone on the landing.

I offered Pickwick a marshmallow in a vain attempt to get her to stand on one leg. She stared vacantly at me, so after several more attempts I gave up, fed her and changed the paper in her basket before calling Spike at SO-17. It wasn't the perfect plan, but it did have the benefit of being the *only* plan, so on that basis alone I reckoned it was worth a try. I was eventually patched through to him in his squad car. I related my problem, and he told me his freelance budget was overstuffed at present as no one ever wanted to be deputized, so we arranged a ludicrously high hourly rate and a time and place to meet. As I put the phone down I realized I had forgotten to say that I preferred *not* to do any vampire work. What the hell. I needed the money.



## 23.

### Fun with Spike

*VAN HELSING'S GAZETTE*: "Did you do much SEB containment work?"

AGENT STOKER: "Oh yes. The capture of Supreme Evil Beings, or SEBs, as we call them, is the main bread-and-butter work for SO-17. Quite how there can be more than one Supreme Evil Being I have no idea. Every SEB I ever captured considered itself not only the worst personification of unadulterated evil that ever stalked the earth, but also the only personification of unadulterated evil that ever stalked the earth. It must have been quite a surprise--and not a little galling--to be locked away with several thousand other SEBs, all pretty much the same, in row upon row of plain glass jars at the Loathsome Id Containment Facility. I don't know where they came from. I think they leak in from elsewhere, the same way as a leaky tap drips water. [laughs] They should replace the washer."

AGENT "SPIKE" STOKER, SO-17 (ret.),  
interviewed for *Van Helsing's Gazette*, 1996

THE INCIDENTS I am about to relate took place in the winter of the year 1985, at a place whose name even now, by reasons of propriety, it seems safer not to divulge. Suffice to say that the small village I visited that night was deserted, and had been for some time. The houses stood empty and vandalized, the pub, corner store, and village hall but empty shells. As I drove slowly into the dark village, rats scurried amongst the detritus and small pockets of mist appeared briefly in my headlights. I reached the old oak at the crossroads, stopped, switched off the lights and surveyed the morbid surroundings. I could hear nothing. Not a breath of wind gave life to the trees about me, no distant sound of humanity raised my spirits. It had not always been so. Once children played here, neighbors hailed neighbors with friendly greetings, lawn mowers buzzed on a Sunday afternoon, and the congenial crack of leather on willow drifted up from the village green. But no more. All lost one late winter's night not five years earlier, when the forces of evil rose and claimed the village and all that lived within. I looked about, my breath showing on the still night. By the manner in which the blackened timbers of the empty houses pierced the sky it seemed as though the memory of that night was still etched upon the fabric of the ruins. Parked close by was another car, and leaning against the door was the man who had brought me to this place. He was tall and muscular and had faced horrors that I, thankfully, would never have to face. He did this with his heart filled with courage and duty in equal measure, and, as I approached, a smile rose on his features, and he spoke.

"Quite a shithole, eh, Thurs?"

"You're not kidding," I replied, glad to be with company. "All kinds of creepy weirdness was running through my head just now."

"How have you been? Hubby still with an existence problem?"

"Still the same--but I'm working on it. What's the score here?"

Spike clapped his hands together and rubbed them.

"Ah, yes! Thanks for coming. This is one job I can't do on my own."

I followed his gaze towards the derelict church and surrounding graveyard. It was a dismal place even by SpecOps-17 standards, which tended to regard anything that is merely *dreary* as a good venue for a party. It was surrounded by two rows of high wire fences; no one had come or gone since the "troubles" ten years previously. The restless spirits of the condemned souls trapped within the churchyard had killed all plant life not only within the confines of the Dark Place but for a short distance all around it--I could see the grass wither and die not two yards from the inner fence, the trees standing lifeless in the moonlight. In truth, the wire fences were to keep the curious or just plain stupid out as much as to keep the undead in; a ring of burnt yew wood just within the outer wire was the last line of undead defense across which they could never move, but it didn't stop them trying. Occasionally a member of the Dark One's Legion of Lost Souls made it across the inner fence. Here they lumbered into the motion sensors affixed at ten-foot intervals. The undead might be quite good servants of the Dark One, but they were certainly crap when it came to electronics. They usually blundered around in the area between the fences until the early-morning sun or an SO-17 flamethrower reduced their lifeless husk to a cinder, and released the tormented soul to make its way through eternity in peace.

I looked at the derelict church and the scattered tombs of the desecrated graveyard and shivered.

"What are we doing? Torching the lifeless walking husks of the undead?"

"Well, no," replied Spike uneasily, moving to the rear of his car. "I wish it were as simple as that."

He opened the boot of his car and passed me a clip of silver bullets. I reloaded my gun and frowned at him.

"What then?"

"Dark forces are afoot, Thursday. Another Supreme Evil Being is pacing the earth."

"Another? What happened? Did he escape?"

Spike sighed.

"There have been a few cuts in recent years, and SEB transportation is now done by a private contractor. Three months ago they mixed up the consignment and instead of delivering him straight to the

Loathsome Id Containment Facility, they left him at the St. Merryweather's Home for Retired Gentlefolk."

"TNN said it was Legionnaire's disease."

"That's the usual cover story. Anyhow, some idiot opened the jar and all hell broke loose. I managed to corner it, but getting the SEB transferred back to his jar is going to be tricky-- and that's where *you* come in."

"Does this plan involve going in *there*?"

I pointed to the church. As if to make a point, two barn owls flew noiselessly from the belfry and soared close by our heads.

"I'm afraid so. We should be fine. There will be a full moon tonight, and they don't generally perambulate on the lightest of nights--it'll be easy as falling off a log."

"So what do I do?" I asked uneasily.

"I can't tell you for fear that he will hear my plan, but keep close and do precisely what I tell you. Do you understand? No matter what it is, you must do *precisely* what I tell you."

"Okay."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"No, I mean you have to *really* promise."

"All right--I *really* promise."

"Good. I officially deputize you into SpecOps-17. Let's pray for a moment."

Spike dropped to his knees and muttered a short prayer under his breath--something about delivering us both from evil and how he hoped his mother would get to the top of the hip replacement waiting list, and that Cindy wouldn't drop him like a hot potato when she found out what he did. As for myself, I said pretty much what I usually said but added that if Landen was watching, could he please please keep an eye out for me.

Spike got up.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

"Then let's make some light out of this darkness."

He pulled a green holdall from the back of the car and a pump-action shotgun. We walked towards the rusty gates and I felt a chill on my neck.

"Feel that?" asked Spike.

"Yes."

"He's close. We'll meet him tonight, I promise you."

Spike unlocked the gates, and they swung open with a squeak of long-unoiled hinges. Operatives generally used their flamethrowers through the wire; no one would trouble coming in here unless there

was serious work to be done. He relocked the gates behind us and we walked through the undead no-go zone.

"What about the motion sensors?"

A beeper went off from his car.

"I'm pretty much the only recipient. Helsing knows what I'm doing; if we fail he'll be along tomorrow morning to clean up the mess."

"Thanks for the reassurance."

"Don't worry," replied Spike with a grin, "we won't fail!"

We arrived at the second gate. The musty smell of long-departed corpses reached my nostrils. It had been softened to the odor of rotted leaves by age, but it was still unmistakable. Once inside the inner gates we made our way swiftly to the lych-gate and walked through the crumbling structure. The churchyard was a mess. The graves had all been dug up, and the remains of those too far gone to be resurrected had been flung around the graveyard. They had been the fortunate ones. Those that were freshly dead had been press-ganged into a second career as servants of the Dark One--not something you would want to put on your CV, if you still had one.

"Untidy bunch, aren't they?" I whispered as we picked our way across the scattered human bones to the heavy oak door.

"I wrote Cindy some poetry," said Spike softly, rummaging in his pocket. "If anything happens, will you give it to her?"

"Give it to her yourself. Nothing's going to happen--you said so yourself. And don't say things like that; it gives me the wobbles."

"Right," said Spike, putting the poem back in his pocket. "Sorry."

He took a deep breath and grasped the handle, turned it and pushed open the door. The interior was not as pitch-black as I had supposed; the moonlight streamed in the remains of the large stained-glass windows and the holes in the roof. Although it was gloomy, we could still see. The church was in no better state than the graveyard. The pews had been thrown around and broken into matchwood. The lectern was lying in an untidy heap, and all sorts of vandalism of a chilling nature had taken place.

"Home away from home for His Supreme Evilness, wouldn't you say?" said Spike with a cheery laugh. He moved behind me and shut the heavy door, turning the large iron key in the lock and handing it to me for safekeeping.

I looked around but could see no one in the church. The door to the vestry was firmly locked, and I looked across at Spike.

"He doesn't appear to be here."

"Oh, he's here, all right--we just have to flush him out. Darkness can hide in all sorts of corners. We just need the right sort of fox terrier to worry it out of the rabbit hole--metaphorically speaking, of course."

"Of course. And where might this metaphorical rabbit hole be?"

Spike looked at me sternly and pointed to his temple.

"He's up here. He thought he could dominate me from within, but I've trapped him somewhere in the frontal lobes. I have some uncomfortable memories, and those help to screen him--trouble is, I can't seem to get him out again."

"I have someone like that," I replied, thinking of Hades barging into the tearoom memory with Landen.

"Oh? Well, forcing him out is going to be a bit tricky. I thought his home ground might make him emerge spontaneously, but it seems not. Hang on, let me have a go."

Spike leaned against the remains of a pew and grunted and strained for a few minutes, making some of the oddest faces as he tried to expel the spirit of the Evil One. It looked as if he were trying to force a bowling ball out of his left nostril. After a few minutes of exertions he stopped.

"Bastard. It's like trying to snatch a trout from a mountain stream with a boxing glove. Never mind. I have a plan B which shouldn't fail."

"The metaphorical fox terrier?"

"Exactly so. Thursday, draw your weapon."

"Now what?"

"Shoot me."

"Where?"

"In the chest, head, anywhere fatal--where did you think? In my foot?"

"You're joking!"

"Never been more serious."

"Then what?"

"Good point. I should have explained that first."

He opened the holdall to reveal a vacuum cleaner.

"Battery powered," explained Spike. "As soon as his spirit makes an appearance, suck him up."

"As simple as that?"

"As simple as that. SEB containment isn't rocket science, Thursday--it's just not for the squeamish. Now, kill me."

"Spike--!"

"What?"

"I can't do it!"

"But you promised--and what's more you *really* promised."

"If promising meant killing you," I replied in an exasperated tone, "I wouldn't have gone along with it!"

"SpecOps-17 work ain't no bed of roses, Thursday. I've had enough, and believe me, having this little nurk coiled up in my head is not as easy as it looks. I should have never let him in in the first place, but what's done is done. You have to kill me and kill me well."

"You're crazy!"

"Undoubtedly. But look around you. You followed me in here. Who's crazier? The crazy or the crazy who follows him?"

"Listen--" I began. "What's that?"

There was a thump on the church door.

"Blast!" replied Spike. "The undead. Not necessarily fatal, and severely handicapped by that slow swagger--but they can be troublesome if you get cornered. After you have killed me and captured Chuckles up here, you may have to shoot your way out. Take my keys; these two here are for the inner and outer gates. It's a bit stiff, and you have to turn it to the left--"

"I get the picture."

Another thump echoed the first. There was a crash from the vestry, and a shape moved past one of the lower windows.

"They are gathering!" said Spike ominously. "You'd better get a move on."

"I can't!"

"You *can*, Thursday. I forgive you. It's been a good career. Did you know that out of the three hundred and twenty-nine SpecOps-17 operatives who have ever been, only two ever made it to retirement age?"

"Did they tell you that when you joined?"

There was the sound of stone against stone as one of the graves from the floor was pushed aside. The undead who was thumping on the door was joined by another--and then another. Outside we could hear the noises of the *awakening*. Despite the moonlit night, the Evil One was calling to his servants--and they were coming running, or shambling, at the very least.

"Do it!" said Spike in a more urgent manner. "Do it *now* before it's too late!"

I raised my gun and pointed it at Spike.

"Do it!"

I increased the pressure on the trigger as a shaky form stood up from the open grave behind him. I pointed the gun at the figure instead--the pathetic creature was so far dried out it could barely move--but it sensed our presence and teetered in our direction anyway.

"Don't shoot it, shoot *me*!" said Spike with some alarm in his voice. "The job in hand, Thursday, *please*!"

I ignored him and pulled the trigger. The hammer fell harmlessly with a dull *thock*.

"Eh?" I said, rechambering the next round. Spike was quicker than I and loosed off a shot that disintegrated the head of the abomination, who then collapsed in a heap of dried skin and powdery bone. The

sound of scrabbling increased from the door.

"God damn and blast, Next, why couldn't you do as I told you?!"

"What?"

"I put that dud on the top of your clip, idiot!"

"Why?"

He tapped his head.

"So I could trick Chuckles in here to come out--he's not going to stay in a host he thinks is about to croak! You pull the trigger, out he comes, dud bullet, Stoker lives, SEB sucked up--QED."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, my temper rising.

"You had to *mean* to kill me! He might be the personification of all that is evil within the heart of man, but he's no fool."

"Oops."

"Oops indeed, knucklehead! Right, we'd better be out of here!"

"Isn't there a plan C?" I asked as we headed for the door.

"Shit no!" replied Spike as he fumbled with the key. "B is as high as I ever get!"

Another creature was arising from behind some upended tables that once held a harvest festival display; I caught it before it was even upright. I turned back to Spike, who had the key in the lock and was muttering something about how he wished he *was* working at Somme WorldTM.

"Stay away from the door, Spike."

He recognized the serious tone in my voice. He turned to face the barrel of my automatic.

"Whoa! Careful, Thursday, that's the end that bites."

"It ends here and tonight, Spike."

"This is a joke, right?"

"No joke, Spike. You're right. I have to kill you. It's the only way."

"Er--steady on, Thursday--aren't you taking this just a *little bit* too seriously?"

"The Supreme Evil Being must be stopped, Spike--you said so yourself!"

"I know I *said* that, but we can come back tomorrow with a plan C instead!"

"There is no plan C, Spike. It ends now. Close your eyes."

"Wait!"

"Close them!"

He closed his eyes and I pulled the trigger and twitched my hand at the same time; the slug powered its way through three layers of clothing, grazed Spike's shoulder and buried itself in the wood of the old door. It did the trick; with a short and unearthly wail, a wispy entity like smoke emerged from Spike's nostrils and coalesced into the ethereal version of an old and long-unwashed dishcloth.

"Good work!" muttered Spike in a very relieved voice as he took a step sideways and started to fumble with the bag that contained the vacuum cleaner. "Don't let it get near you!"

I drew back as the wraithlike spirit moved in my direction.

"Fooled!" said a low voice. "Fooled by a mere mortal, how utterly, *utterly* depressing!"

The thumping had now increased and was also coming from the vestry door; I could see the hinge pins start to loosen in the powdery mortar.

"Keep him talking!" yelled Spike as he pulled out the vacuum cleaner.

"A *vacuum cleaner*!" sneered the low voice. "Spike, you insult me!"

Spike didn't answer but instead unwound the hose and switched the battery-powered appliance on.

"A vacuum cleaner won't hold me!" sneered the voice again. "Do you really believe that I can be trapped in a bag like so much dust?"

Spike turned the vacuum cleaner on and sucked up the small spirit in a trice.

"He didn't seem that frightened of it," I murmured as Spike fiddled with the machine's controls.

"This isn't *any* vacuum cleaner, Thursday. James over at R&D dreamt it up for me. You see, unlike conventional vacuum cleaners, this one works on a dual cyclone principle that traps dust and evil spirits by powerful centrifugal force. Since there is no bag, there is no loss of suction--you can use a lower-wattage motor. There's a hose action--and a small brush for stair carpets."

"You find evil spirits in stair carpets?"

"No, but my stair carpets need cleaning just the same as anyone else's."

I looked at the glass container and could see a small vestige of white spinning round very rapidly. Spike deftly placed the lid on the jar and detached it from the machine. He held it up, and there inside was a very angry and now quite dizzy spirit of the Evil One--well and truly trapped.

"As I said," went on Spike, "it's not rocket science. You had me scared, though; I thought you really *were* going to kill me!"

"That," I replied, "was plan D!"

"Spike . . . you . . . you . . . you . . . *bastard*!" said the small voice from inside the jar. "You'll suffer the worst torments in hell for this!"

"Yeah, yeah," replied Spike as he placed the jar in the holdall, "you and all the rest."

He slung the bag round his body, replaced the spent cartridge in his shotgun with another from his pocket and flicked off the safety.

"Come on, those deadbeats are starting to get on my tits. Whoever



nails the least is a sissypants."

We flung open the door to a bunch of very surprised dried corpses, who fell inwards in a large tangled mass of putrefied torsos and sticklike limbs. Spike opened fire first, and after we had dispatched that lot we dashed outside, dodged the slower of the undead and cut down the others as we made our way to the gates.

"The Cindy problem," I said as the head of a long-dead carcass exploded in response to Spike's shotgun. "Did you do as I suggested?"

"Sure did," replied Spike, letting fly at another walking corpse. "Stakes and crucifixes in the garage and all my back issues of *Van Helsing's Gazette* in the living room."

"Did she get the message?" I asked, surprising another walking corpse who had been trying to stay out of the action behind a tombstone.

"She didn't say anything," he replied, decapitating two dried cadavers, "but the funny thing is, I now find copies of *Sniper* magazine in the toilet--and a copy of *Great Underworld Hitmen* has appeared in the kitchen."

"Perhaps she's trying to tell *you* something?"

"Yes," agreed Spike, "but what?"

I bagged ten undead that night, but Spike only managed eight-- so he was the sissypants. We partook of a haddock chowder with freshly baked bread at a roadside eatery and joked about the night's events while the SEB swore at us from his glass jar. I got my six hundred quid and my landlord didn't get Pickwick. All in all, it was a good evening well spent.

## 24.

### Performance-Related Pay, Miles Hawke & Norland Park

Performance-Related Pay was the bane of SpecOps as much then as it is now. How can your work be assessed when your job is so extraordinarily varied? I would love to have seen Officer Stoker's review panel listen to what he got up to. It was no surprise to anyone that they rarely lasted more than twenty seconds, and he was, as always, awarded an A + + --"Exceptional service, monthly bonus recommended."

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*A Life in SpecOps*

**D**OG-TIRED, I slept well that night and had expected to see Landen but dreamt of Humpty Dumpty, which was odd. I went in to work, avoided Cordelia again and then had to take my turn with the employment review board, which was all part of the SpecOps work-related pay scheme. Victor would have given us all A + + , but sadly it wasn't conducted by him--it was chaired by the area commander, Braxton Hicks.

"Ah, Next!" he said jovially as I entered. "Good to see you. Have a seat, won't you?"

I thanked him and sat down. He looked at my performance file over the past few months and stroked his mustache thoughtfully.

"How's your golf?"

"I never took it up."

"Really?" he said with surprise. "You sounded most keen when we first met."

"I've been busy."

"Quite, quite. Well, you've been with us three months and on the whole your performance seems to be excellent. That *Jane Eyre* malarkey was a remarkable achievement; it did SpecOps the power of good and showed those bean counters in London that the Swindon office could hold its own."

"Thank you."

"No really, I mean it. All this PR work you've been doing. The network is very grateful to you, and more than that, *I'm* grateful to you. I could have been on the scrap heap if it wasn't for you. I'd really like to shake you by the hand and--I don't do this very often, y'know--put you up for membership of my golf club. *Full* membership, no less--the sort usually reserved for men."

"That's more than generous of you," I said, getting up to leave.

"Sit down, Next--that was just the friendly bit."

"There's more?"

"Yes," he replied, his demeanor changing abruptly. "*Despite* all of that, your conduct over the past two weeks has been less than satisfactory. I've had a complaint from Mrs. Hathaway<sup>34</sup> to say that you failed to spot her forged copy of *Cardenio*."

"I told her it was a forgery in no uncertain terms."

"That's *your* story, Next. I haven't located your report on the matter."

"I didn't think it was worth the trouble to write one, sir."

"We have to keep on top of paperwork, Next. If the new legislation on SpecOps accountability comes into force, we will be under severe scrutiny every time we so much as sneeze, so get used to it. And what's this about you hitting a neanderthal?"

"A misunderstanding."

"Hm. Is this also a misunderstanding?"

He laid a police charge sheet on the desk.

"*Permissioning a horse and cartcar to be driven by personn of low moral turpithtude*. You lent your car to a lunatic driver, then helped her to escape the law. What on earth did you think you were doing?"

"The greater good, sir."

"No such thing," he barked back, handing me a SpecOps claim docket. "Officer Tillen at stores gave me this. It's your claim for a new Browning automatic."

I stared dumbly at the docket. My original Browning, the one I had looked after from first issue, had been left in a motorway services somewhere in a patch of bad time.

"I take this very seriously, Next. It says here you 'lost' SpecOps property in *unsanctioned* SO-12 work. Flagrant disregard for network property makes me very angry, Next. There is our budget to think of, you know."

"I thought it would come down to *that*," I murmured.

"What did you say?"

"I said: 'I'll retrieve it eventually, sir.' "

"Maybe so. But lost property has to come under the *monthly* current expenditure and not the *yearly* resupply budget. We've been a little stretched recently. Your escapade with *Jane Eyre* was successful but not without cost. All things considered, I am sorry but I will have to mark your performance as 'F--definite room for improvement.' "

"An F? Sir, I must protest!"

"Talk's over, Next. I'm truly sorry. This is quite outside my hands."

"Is this an SO-1 way of punishing me?" I asked indignantly. "You know I've never had anything lower than an A in all my eight years with the service!"

"Raising your voice does you no good at all, young lady," replied Hicks in an even tone, wagging his finger as a man might do to his spaniel. "This interview is over. I am sorry, believe me."

I didn't believe he was sorry for one moment--and suspected that he had been influenced from higher up. I sighed, got up, saluted and made for the door.

"Wait!" said Braxton. "There's something else."

I returned.

"Yes?"

"Keep your temper."

"Is that all?"

"No."

He handed over a packet of clothes in a polythene bundle.

"The department is now sponsored by the Toast Marketing Board. You'll find a hat, T-shirt and jacket in this package. Wear them when you can and be prepared for some corporate entertainment."

"Sir--!"

"Don't complain. If you hadn't eaten that toast on *The Adrian Lush Show* they never would have contacted us. Over a million quid in funding--not to be sniffed at with people like you soaking up the funds. Shut the door on the way out, will you?"

The morning's fun wasn't over. As I stepped out of Braxton's office I almost bumped into Flanker.

"Ah!" he said. "Next. A word with you, if you don't mind--?"

It wasn't a request--it was an order. I followed him into an empty interview room and he closed the door.

"Seems to me you're in such deep shit your eyes will turn brown, Next."

"My eyes are already brown, Flanker."

"Then you're halfway there already. I'll come straight to the point. You earned PS600 last night."

"So?"

"The service takes a dim view of moonlighting."

"It was Stoker at SO-27," I told him. "I was deputized--all aboveboard."

Flanker went quiet. His intelligence-gathering had obviously let him down badly.

"Can I go?"

Flanker sighed.

"Listen, here, Thursday," he began in a more moderate tone of voice, "we need to know what your father is up to."

"What's the problem? Industrial action standing in the way of next week's cataclysmic event?"

"Freelance navigators will sort it out, Next."

He was bluffing.

"You have no more idea about the nature of the Armageddon than Dad, me, Lavoisier, or anyone else, do you?"

"Perhaps not," replied Flanker, "but we at SpecOps are far better suited to having no clue at all than you and that chronupt father of yours."

"Chronupt?" I said angrily, getting to my feet. "My father? That's a joke! What is your golden boy Lavoisier doing eradicating my husband, then?"

Flanker eyed me silently for a moment.

"That's a very serious accusation," he observed. "Have you any proof?"

"Of course not," I replied, barely able to conceal my rage. "Isn't that the point of eradication?"

"I have known Lavoisier for longer than I would care to forget," intoned Flanker gravely, "and I have never had anything but the highest regard for his integrity. Making wild accusations isn't going to help your cause one iota."

I sat down again and rubbed a hand across my face. Dad had been right. Accusing Lavoisier of any wrongdoing was pointless.

"Can I go?"

"I have nothing to hold you on, Next. But I'll find something. Every agent is on the make. It's just a question of digging deep enough."

"How did it go?" asked Bowden when I got back to the office.

"I got an F," I muttered, sinking into my chair.

"Flanker," said Bowden, trying on his *Eat More Toast* cap. "Has to be."

"How did the stand-up go?"

"Very well, I think," answered Bowden, dropping the cap in the bin. "The audience seemed to find it very funny indeed. So much so that they want me to come back as a regular--What are you doing?"

I slithered to the floor as quickly as I could and hid under the table. I would have to trust Bowden's quick wits.

"Hello!" said Miles Hawke as he walked into the room. "Has anyone seen Thursday?"

"I think she's at her monthly assessment meeting," replied Bowden, whose deadpan delivery was obviously as well suited to lying as it was to stand-up. "Can I take a message?"

"No, just ask her to get in contact, if she could."

"Why don't you stay and wait?" said Bowden. I kicked him under the table.

"No, I'd better run along," replied Miles. "Just tell her I dropped by,

won't you?"

He walked off and I stood up. Bowden, *very* unusually for him, was giggling.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing--why don't you want to see him?"

"Because I might be carrying his baby."

"You're going to have to speak up. I can hardly hear you."

"I might," I repeated in a hoarse whisper, "be carrying his *baby!*"

"I thought you said it was Land--What's the matter now?"

I had dropped to the ground again as Cordelia Flakk walked in. She was scanning the office for me in annoyance, hands on hips.

"Have you seen Thursday about?" she asked Bowden. "She's *got* to meet these people of mine."

"I'm really not sure where she is," replied Bowden.

"Really? Then who was it I saw ducking under this table?"

"Hello, Cordelia," I said from beneath the table. "I dropped my pencil."

"Sure you did."

I clambered out and sat down at my desk.

"I expected more from you, Bowden," said Flakk crossly, then turned to me: "Now, Thursday. We promised these two people they could meet you. Do you really want to disappoint them? *Your* public, you know."

"They're not my public, Cordelia, they're *yours*. You made them for me."

"I've had to keep them at the Finis for another night," implored Cordelia. "Costs are escalating. They're downstairs right now. I knew you'd be in for your assessment. How did you do, by the way?"

"Don't ask."

I looked at Bowden, who shrugged. Looking for some sort of rescue, I twisted on my seat to where Victor was running a possible unpublished sequel of *1984* entitled *1985* through the Prose Analyzer. All the other members of the office were busy on their various tasks. It looked like my PR career was just about to restart.

"All right," I sighed, "I'll do it."

"Better than hiding under the desk," said Bowden. "All that jumping around is probably not good for the baby."

He clapped his hand over his mouth, but it was too late.

"Baby?" echoed Cordelia. "What baby?"

"Thanks, Bowden."

"Sorry."

"Well, congratulations!" said Cordelia, hugging me. "Who is the lucky father?"

"I don't know."

"You mean you haven't told him yet?"

"No, I mean I don't know. My husband's, I hope."

"You're married?"

"No."

"But you said--?"

"Yes I did," I retorted as dryly as I could. "Confusing, isn't it?"

"This is *very* bad PR," muttered Cordelia darkly, sitting on the edge of the desk to steady herself. "The leading light of SpecOps knocked up in a bus shelter by someone she doesn't even know!"

"Cordelia, it's not like that--and I wasn't 'knocked up'--and who mentioned anything about bus shelters? Perhaps the best thing would be if you kept this under your hat and we pretend that *Bowden* never said anything."

"Sorry," muttered Bowden meekly.

Cordelia leaped to her feet.

"Good thinking, Next. We can tell everyone you have water retention or an eating disorder brought on by stress." Her face fell. "No, that won't work. *The Toad* will see through it like a shot. Can't you get married really quickly to someone? What about to Bowden? Bowden, would you do the decent thing for the sake of SpecOps?"

"I'm seeing someone over at SpecOps-13," replied Bowden hurriedly.

"Blast!" muttered Flakk. "Thursday, any ideas?"

But this was a part of Bowden I knew nothing about.

"You never told me you were seeing someone over at SO-13!"

"I don't have to tell you *everything*."

"But I'm your partner, Bowden!"

"Well, you never told me about Miles."

"Miles?" exclaimed Cordelia. "The oh-so-handsome-to-die-for Miles *Hawke*?"

"Thanks, Bowden."

"Sorry."

"That's *wonderful*!" exclaimed Cordelia, clapping her hands together. "A dazzling couple! 'SpecOps wedding of the year!' This is worth soooooo much coverage! Does he know?"

"No. And you're not going to tell him. And what's more-- *Bowden*--it might not even be his."

"Which puts us back to square one again!" responded Cordelia in a huff. "Stay here, I'm going to fetch my guests. Bowden, don't let her out of your sight!"

And she was gone.

Bowden stared at me for a moment and then asked: "Do you really believe the baby is Landen's?"

"I'm hoping."

"You're not married, Thurs. You might think you are, but you're not."

I looked at the records. Landen Parke-Laine died in 1947."

"*This* time he did. My father and I went--"

"You don't have a father, Thursday. There is no record of anyone on your birth certificate. I think maybe you should speak to one of the stressperts."

"And end up doing comedy stand-up, arranging pebbles or counting blue cars? No, thanks."

There was a pause.

"He is very handsome," said Bowden.

"Who?"

"Miles Hawke, of course."

"Oh. Yes, yes I know he is."

"Very polite, very popular."

"I know that."

"A child without a father--"

"Bowden, I'm not in love with him and it isn't his baby-- okay?"

"Okay, okay. Let's forget it."

We sat there in silence for a bit. I played with a pencil and Bowden stared out of the window.

"What about the voices?"

"Bowden--!"

"Thursday, this is for your own good. You told me you heard them yourself, and officers Hurdyew, Tolkien and Lissning heard you talking and listening to someone in the upstairs corridor."

"Well, the voices have stopped," I said categorically. " Nothing like that will *ever* happen again.<sup>1</sup>

"Oh shit."<sup>2</sup>

"What do you mean, 'Oh shit'?"

"Nothing--just, well, that. I've got to use the ladies' room-- would you excuse me?"

I left Bowden shaking his head sadly and was soon in the ladies'. I checked the stalls were empty and then said: "Miss Havisham, are you there?"<sup>3</sup>

"You must understand, Miss Havisham, that where I come from customs are different from your own. People curse here as a matter of course."<sup>4</sup>

"I'll be there directly, ma'am!"

I bit my lip and rushed out of the ladies', grabbed my Jurisdiction travelbook and my jacket and was heading back when--

"Thursday!" went a loud and strident voice that I knew could only be Flakk's. "I've got the winners outside in the corridor--!"

"I'm sorry, Cordelia, but I *have* to go to the loo."

"Don't think I'm going to fall for *that* one again, do you?" she growled under her breath.



"It's true this time."

"And the book?"

"I always read on the loo."

She narrowed her eyes at me and I narrowed my eyes back.

"Very well," she said finally, "but I'm coming with you."

She smiled at the two lucky winners of her crazy competition, who were outside in the corridor. They smiled back through the half-glazed office door and we both trotted into the ladies'.

"Ten minutes," she said to me as I locked myself in a cubicle. I opened the book and started to read:

"Many were the tears shed by them in their last adieus to a place so much beloved. 'Dear, dear Norland!' said Marianne, as she wandered alone before the house, on the last evening of their being there. . . ."

The small melamine cubicle started to evaporate, and in its place was a large park, bathed in the light of a dying sun, the haze softening the shadows and making the house glow in the failing light. There was a light breeze and in front of the house a lone girl dressed in a Victorian dress, bonnet and shawl. She walked slowly, gazing fondly at the--

"Do you always read aloud in the toilet?" asked Cordelia from behind the door.

The images evaporated in a flash and I was back in the ladies'.

"Always," I replied. "And if you don't leave me alone, I'll *never* be finished."

". . . when shall I cease to regret you!--when learn to feel a home elsewhere?--Oh! happy house, could you know what I suffer in now viewing you from this spot, from whence perhaps I may view you know more!--And you, ye well known trees!--But you will continue . . ."

The house came back again, the young woman talking quietly, matching her words to mine as I drifted into the book. I was now sitting not on a hard SpecOps standard toilet seat but a white-painted wrought-iron garden bench. I stopped reading when I was certain I was completely within *Sense and Sensibility* and listened to Marianne as she finished her speech:

". . . and insensible of any change in those who walk under your shade!--But who will remain to enjoy you?"

She sighed dramatically, clasped her hands to her breast and sobbed

quietly for a moment or two. Then she took one long look at the large white-painted house and turned to face me.

"Hello!" she said in a friendly voice. "I haven't seen you around here before. Would you be working for Juris-thingummy-whatsit?"

"Don't we have to be careful as to what we say?" I managed to utter, looking around nervously.

"Goodness me *no!*" exclaimed Marianne with a delightful giggle. "The chapter is over, and besides, this book is written in the *third person*. We are free to do what we please until tomorrow morning, when we depart for Devon. The next two chapters are heavy with exposition--I hardly have anything to do, and I say even less! You look confused, poor thing! Have you been into a book before?"

"I went into *Jane Eyre* once."

Marianne frowned overdramatically.

"Poor, dear, sweet Jane! I would so *hate* to be a first-person character! Always on your guard, always having people reading your thoughts! Here we *do* what we are told but *think* what we wish. It is a much happier circumstance, believe me!"

"What do you know about Jurisdiction?" I asked.

"They will be arriving shortly," she explained. "Mrs. Dashwood might be beastly to Mama, but she understands self-preservation. We wouldn't want to suffer the same tragic fate as *Confusion and Conviviality*, now would we?"

"Is that Austen?" I queried. "I've not even heard of it!"

Marianne sat down next to me and rested her hand on my arm.

"Mama said it was *socialist collective*," she confided in a hoarse whisper. "There was a revolution--they took over the entire book and decided to run it on the principle of every character having an equal part, from the Duchess to the cobbler! I ask you! Jurisdiction tried to save it, of course, but it was too far gone--not even Ambrose could do anything. The entire book was . . . *boojummed!*"

She said the last word so seriously that I would have laughed had she not been staring at me so intensely with her dark brown eyes.

"How I do talk!" she said at last, jumping up, clapping her hands and doing a twirl on the lawn. ". . . *and insensible of any change in those who walk under your shade . . .*"

She stopped and checked herself, placed her hand over her mouth and nose and uttered an embarrassed girlish giggle.

"What a loon!" she muttered. "I've said that already! Farewell, Miss, miss--I beg your pardon but I don't know your name!"

"It's Thursday--Thursday Next."

"What a strange name!"

She gave a small curtsy in a half-joking way.

"I am Marianne Dashwood, and I welcome you, Miss Next, to *Sense*

*and Sensibility.*"

"Thank you," I replied. "I'm sure I shall enjoy it here."

"I'm sure you shall. We all enjoy it tremendously--do you think it shows?"

"I think it shows a great deal, Miss Dashwood."

"Call me Marianne, if it pleases you."

She stopped and thought for a moment, smiled politely, looked over her shoulder and then said:

"May I be so bold as to ask you a favor?"

"Of course."

She sat on the seat with me and stared into my eyes.

"Please, I wonder if I might be so bold as to ask when *your* own book is set."

"I'm not a bookperson, Miss Dashwood--I'm from the real world."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Please excuse me; I didn't mean to imply that you weren't real or anything. In that case, when, might I ask, is your own world set?"

I smiled at her strange logic and told her: 1985. She was pleased to hear this and leaned closer still.

"Please excuse the impertinence, but would you bring something back next time you come?"

"Such as--?"

"Mintolas. I simply *adore* Mintolas. You've heard of them, of course? A bit like Munchies but minty--and, if it's no trouble, a few pairs of nylon tights--and some AA batteries; a dozen would be perfect."

"Sure. Anything else?"

Marianne thought for a moment.

"Elinor would so *hate* me asking favors from a stranger, but I happen to know she has an inordinate fondness for Marmite--and some real coffee for Mama."

I told her I would do what I could. She thanked me profusely, pulled on a leather flying helmet and goggles that she had secreted within her shawl, held my hand for a moment and then was gone, running across the lawn.

## 25.

### Roll Call at Jurisfiction

**Boojum:** Term used to describe the total annihilation of a word/ line/character/subplot/book/series. Complete and irreversible, the nature of a boojum is still the subject of some heated speculation. Some past members of Jurisfiction theorize that a Boojum might be a gateway to an "antilibRARY" somewhere beyond the " imagination horizon." It is possible that the semimythical *Snark* may hold the key to decipher what is, at present, a mystery.

**Bowdlerizers:** A group of fanatics who attempt to excise obscenity and profanity from all texts. Named after Thomas Bowdler, who attempted to make Shakespeare "family reading" by cutting lines from the plays, believing by so doing that "the transcendental genius of the poet would undoubtedly shine with greater luster." Bowdler died in 1825, but his torch is still carried, illegally, by active cells eager to complete and extend his unfinished work at any cost. Attempts to infiltrate the Bowdlerizers have so far met with no success.

UNITARY AUTHORITY OF WARRINGTON CAT,  
*The Jurisfiction Guide to the Great Library* (glossary)

I WATCHED MARIANNE until she was no longer in sight and then, realizing that her "*remain to enjoy you*" line was the *last* of Chapter Five and Chapter Six begins with the Dashwoods already embarked on their journey, I decided to wait and see what a chapter ending looks like. If I had expected a thunderclap or something equally dramatic, I was to be disappointed. Nothing happened. The leaves in the trees gently rustled, the occasional sound of a wood pigeon reached my ears, and before me a red squirrel hopped across the grass. I heard an engine start up and a few minutes later a biplane rose from the meadow behind the rhododendrons, circled the house twice and then headed off towards the setting sun. I rose and walked across the finely manicured lawn, nodded at a gardener who tipped his head in reply and made my way to the front door. Norland was never described in that much detail in *Sense and Sensibility*, but it was every bit as impressive as I thought it would be. The house was located within a broad sweeping parkland which was occasionally punctuated by mature oak trees. In the distance I could see only woods, and beyond that, the occasional church spire. Outside the front door there was a Bugatti 35B motorcar and a huge white charger saddled for battle, munching idly on some grass. A large white dog was attached to the saddle by a length of string, and it had managed to wrap itself three times around a tree.

I trotted up the steps and tugged on the bell pull. Within a few minutes a uniformed footman answered and looked at me blankly.

"Thursday Next," I said. "Here for Jurisfiction--Miss Havisham."

The footman, who had large bulging eyes and a curved head like a frog, opened the door and announced me simply by rearranging the words a bit:

"Miss Havisham, Thursday Next--here for Jurisfiction!"

I stepped inside and frowned at the empty hall, wondering quite who the footman thought he was actually announcing me to. I turned to ask him where I should go, but he bowed stiffly and walked--excruciatingly slowly, I thought--to the other side of the hall, where he opened a door and then stood back, staring at something above and behind me. I thanked him, stepped in and found myself in the central ballroom of the house. The room was painted in white and pale blue, and the walls, where not decorated with delicate plaster moldings, were hung with lavish gold-framed mirrors. Above me the glazed ceiling let in the evening light, but already I could see servants preparing candelabra.

It had been a long time since the Jurisfiction offices had been used as a ballroom. The floor space was liberally covered with sofas, tables, filing cabinets and desks piled high with paperwork. To one side a table had been set up with coffee urns, and tasty snacks were arrayed upon delicate china. There were two dozen or so people milling about, sitting down, chatting or just staring vacantly into space. I could see Akrid Snell at the far side of the room, speaking into what looked like a small gramophone horn connected by a flexible brass tube to the floor. I tried to get his attention, but at that moment--

"Please," said a voice close by, "draw me a sheep!"

I looked down to see a young boy of no more than ten. He had curly golden locks and stared at me with an intensity that was, to say the least, unnerving.

"Please," he repeated, "draw me a sheep."

"You had better do as he asks," said a familiar voice close by. "Once he starts on you he'll *never* let it go."

It was Miss Havisham. I dutifully drew the best sheep I could and handed the result to the boy, who walked away, very satisfied with the result.

"Welcome to Jurisfiction," said Miss Havisham, still limping slightly from her injury at Booktastic and once more dressed in her rotted wedding robes. "I won't introduce you to everyone straightaway, but there are one or two people you should know."

She took me by the arm and guided me towards a conservatively dressed lady who was attending to the servants as they laid out some food upon the table.

"This is Mrs. John Dashwood; she graciously allows us the use of her home. Mrs. Dashwood, this is Miss Thursday Next-- she is my new apprentice."

I shook Mrs. Dashwood's delicately proffered hand, and she smiled politely.

"Welcome to Norland Park, Miss Next. You are fortunate indeed to have Miss Havisham as your teacher--she does not often take pupils. But tell me, as I am not so very conversant with contemporary fiction--what book are you from?"

"I'm not from a book, Mrs. Dashwood."

Mrs. Dashwood looked startled for a moment, then smiled even more politely, took my arm in hers, muttered a pleasantry to Miss Havisham about "getting acquainted" and steered me off towards the tea table.

"How do you find Norland, Miss Next?"

"Very lovely, Mrs. Dashwood."

"Can I offer you a Crumbobbilous cutlet?" she asked in a clearly agitated manner, handing me a sideplate and napkin and indicating the food.

"Or some tea?"

"No, thank you."

"I'll come straight to the point, Miss Next."

"You seem most anxious to do so."

She glanced furtively to left and right and lowered her voice.

"Does everyone *out there* think my husband and I are so *very* cruel, cutting the girls and their mother out of Henry Dashwood's bequest?"

She looked at me so *very* seriously that I wanted to smile.

"Well," I began--

"Oh I knew it!" gasped Mrs. Dashwood. She pressed the back of her hand to her forehead in a dramatic gesture. "I told John that we should reconsider--I expect *out there* we are burnt in effigy, reviled for our actions, damned for all time?"

"Not at all," I said, attempting to console her. "Narratively speaking, without your actions there wouldn't be much of a story."

Mrs. Dashwood took a handkerchief from her cuff and dried her eyes, which, as far as I could see, had not even the smallest tear in them.

"You are so right, Miss Next. Thank you for your kind words--but if you hear anyone speaking ill of me, please tell them that it was my husband's decision--I tried to stop him, believe me!"

"Of course," I said, reassuring her. I made my excuses and left to find Miss Havisham.

"We call it *minor character syndrome*," explained Miss Havisham after I rejoined her. "Quite common when an essentially minor character has a large and consequential part. She and her husband have allowed us the use of this room ever since the trouble with *Confusion and Conviviality*. In return we make all Jane Austen books a matter of our

special protection; we don't want anything like that to happen again. There is a satellite office in the basement of Elsinore castle run by Mr. Falstaff-- that's him over there."

She pointed to an overweight man with a florid face who was in conversation with another agent. They both laughed uproariously at something Falstaff had said.

"Who is he talking to?"

"Vernham Deane, romantic lead in one of Daphne Farquitt's novels. Mr. Deane is a stalwart member of Jurisdiction, so we don't hold it against him--"

"*WHERE IS HAVISHAM!?*" bellowed a voice like thunder. The doors burst open and a very disheveled Red Queen hopped in. The whole room fell silent. Except, that is, for Miss Havisham, who said in an unnecessarily provocative tone:

"Bargain hunting just doesn't suit some people, now does it?"

The assembled Jurisdiction operatives, realizing that all they were witnessing was another round in a long and very personal battle, carried on talking.

The Red Queen had a large and painful-looking black eye, and two of her fingers were in a splint. The sales at Booktastic had not been kind to her.

"What's on your mind, your majesty?" asked Havisham in an even tone.

"Meddle in my affairs again," growled the Red Queen, "and I won't be responsible for my actions!"

I shuffled uncomfortably and wanted to move away from this embarrassing confrontation. But since I thought *someone* should be on hand to separate them if there was a fight, I remained where I was.

"Don't you think you're taking this a little too seriously, your majesty?" said Havisham, always maintaining due regal respect. "It was only a set of Farquitts, after all!"

"A *boxed* set!" replied the Red Queen coldly. "You deliberately took the gift I planned to give to my own dear beloved husband. And do you know why?"

Miss Havisham pursed her lips and was silent.

"Because you can't bear it that I'm happily married!"

"Rubbish!" returned Miss Havisham angrily. "We beat you fair and square!"

"Ladies and, er, ladies and *majesties*, please!" I said in a conciliatory tone. "Do we have to argue here at Norland Park?"

"Ah yes!" said the Red Queen. "Do you know *why* we use *Sense and Sensibility*? Why Miss Havisham *insisted* on it, in fact?"

"Don't believe this," murmured Miss Havisham. "It's all poppycock. Her majesty is a verb short of a sentence."

"I'll tell you why," went on the Red Queen angrily, "because in *Sense and Sensibility* there are no strong father or husband figures!"

Miss Havisham was silent.

"Face the facts, Havisham. Neither the Dashwoods, the Steeles, the Ferrar brothers, Eliza Brandon or Willoughby have a father to guide them! Aren't you taking your hatred of men just a little too far?"

"Deluded," replied Havisham, then added after a short pause: "Well then, *your majesty*, since we are in a questioning vein, just what is it, *exactly*, that you rule over?"

The Red Queen turned scarlet--which was tricky, as she was *quite* red to begin with--and pulled a small dueling pistol from her pocket. Havisham was quick and *also* drew her weapon, and there they stood, quivering with rage, guns pointing at each other. Fortunately the sound of a bell tingling caught their attention and they both lowered their weapons.

"The Bellman!" hissed Miss Havisham as she took my arm and moved towards where a man dressed as a town crier stood on a low dais. "*Showtime!*"

The small group of people gathered around the crier; the Red Queen and Miss Havisham stood side by side, their argument seemingly forgotten. I looked around at the odd assortment of characters and wondered quite what I was doing here. Still, if I was to learn how to travel in books, I would have to know more. I listened attentively.

The Bellman put down his bell and consulted a list of notes.

"Is everyone here? Where's the Cat?"

"I'm over there," purred the Cat, sitting precariously atop one of the gold-framed mirrors.

"Good. Okay, anyone missing?"

"Shelley's gone boating," said a voice at the back. "He'll be back in an hour if the weather holds."

"O-kay," continued the Bellman. "Jurisfiction session number 40311 is now in session."

He tingled his bell again, coughed and consulted a clipboard.

"Item one is bad news, I'm afraid."

There was a respectful hush. He paused for a moment and picked his words carefully.

"I think we will all have to come to the conclusion that David and Catriona aren't coming back. It's been eighteen sessions now, and we have to assume that they've been . . . *boojummed*."

There was a reflective pause.

"We remember David and Catriona Balfour as friends, colleagues, worthy members of our calling, protagonists in *Kidnapped* and *Catriona* and for all the booksploring they did-- especially finding a way into Barchester, for which we will always be grateful. I ask for a



minute's silence. To the Balfours!"

"The Balfours!" we all repeated. Then, heads bowed, we stood in silence. After a minute ticked by, the Bellman spoke again.

"Now, I don't want to sound disrespectful, but what we learn from this is that we must *always* sign the outings book so we know where you are--*particularly* if you are exploring new routes. Don't forget the ISBN numbers either--they weren't introduced *just* for cataloguing, now were they? Mr. Bradshaw's maps might have a traditionalist's charm about them--"

"Who's Bradshaw?" I whispered.

"*Commander* Bradshaw," explained Havisham. "Retired now but a wonderful character--did most of the booksporing in the early days."

--but they are old and full of errors," continued the Bellman. "New technology is here to be used, guys. Anyone who wants to attend a training course on how ISBN numbers relate to transbook travel, see the Cat for details."

The Bellman looked around the room as if to reinforce the order, then unfolded a sheet of paper and adjusted his glasses.

"Right. Item two. New recruit. Thursday Next. Where are you?"

The assembled Prose Resource Operatives looked around the room before I waved a hand to get their attention.

"There you are. Thursday is apprenticed to Miss Havisham; I'm sure you'll all join me in welcoming her to our little band."

"Didn't like the way *Jane Eyre* turned out?" said someone in a hostile tone from the back. Everyone watched as a middle-aged man stood up and walked up to the Bellman's dais. There was silence.

"Who's that?" I hissed.

"Harris Tweed," replied Havisham. "Dangerous and arrogant but *quite* brilliant--for a man."

"Who approved her application?" asked Tweed.

"She didn't apply, Harris," replied the Bellman. "Her appointment was forshadowed long ago. Besides, her work within *Jane Eyre* ridding the book of the loathsome Hades is good enough testimonial for me."

"But she *altered* the book!" cried Tweed angrily. "Who's to say she wouldn't do the same again?"

"I did what I did for the best," I said in a loud voice, feeling I had to defend myself against Tweed. This startled him--I got the feeling no one really stood up to him.

"If it wasn't for Thursday we wouldn't *have* a book," said the Bellman. "A full book with a different ending is better than half a book without."

"That's not what the rules say, Bellman."

To my great relief, Miss Havisham spoke up.

"*Truly* competent Literary Detectives are as rare as truthful men, Mr.

Tweed--you can see her potential as clearly as I can. Frightened of someone stealing your thunder, perhaps?"

"It's not that at all," protested Tweed. "But what if she were here for another reason altogether?"

"I shall vouch for her!" said Miss Havisham in a thunderous tone. "I call for a show of hands. If there is a majority amongst you who think my judgment poor, then put your hands up now and I will banish her back to where she came from!"

She said it with such a show of fierce temper that I thought that no one would raise a hand; in the event, only one did-- Tweed himself, who, after reading the situation, judged that good grace was the best way in which to retire. He gave a wan half-smile, bowed and said: "I withdraw all objections."

I sighed a sigh of relief as Havisham nudged me in the ribs and gave me a wink.

"Good," said the Bellman as Tweed returned to his desk. "As I was saying, we welcome Miss Next to Jurisdiction and we don't want any of those silly practical jokes we usually play on new recruits--okay?"

He surveyed the room with a stern expression before returning to his list.

"Item two: There is an illegal PageRunner from Shakespeare, so this is a priority red. Perp's name is Feste; worked as a jester in *Twelfth Night*. Took flight after a debauched night with Sir Toby. Who wants to go after him?"

A hand went up in the crowd.

"Fabien? Thanks. You may have to stand in for him for a while; take Falstaff with you, but please, Sir John--stay out of sight. You've been allowed to stay in *Merry Wives*, but don't push your luck."

Falstaff got up, bowed clumsily, burped, and sat down again.

"Item three: Interloper in the Sherlock Holmes series by the name of Mycroft--turns up quite unexpectedly in *The Greek Interpreter* and claims to be his brother. Anyone know anything about this?"

I shrank lower, hoping that no one would have enough knowledge of my world to know we were related. Sly old Fox! So he *had* rebuilt the Prose Portal. I covered my mouth to hide a smile.

"No?" went on the Bellman. "Well, Sherlock seems to think he *is* his brother, and so far there is no harm done--but I think this would be a good opportunity to open up a way into the Sherlock Holmes series. Suggestions, anyone?"

"How about through 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'?" suggested Tweed, to the accompaniment of laughter and catcalls from around the room.

"Order! *Sensible* suggestions, please. Poe is out of bounds and will remain so. It's possible 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' might open

an avenue to *all* detective stories that came after it, but I won't sanction the risk. Now--any other suggestions?"

"*The Lost World*?"

There were a few giggles, but they soon stopped; this time Tweed was serious.

"Conan Doyle's other works might afford a link to the Sherlock Holmes series," he added gravely. "I know we can get into *The Lost World*. I just need to find a way to move beyond that."

There was an uncomfortable moment as the Jurisfiction agents muttered to one another.

"What's the problem?" I whispered.

"Adventure stories always bring the highest risks to anyone establishing a new route," hissed back Miss Havisham. "The worst you might expect from a romantic novel or domestic potboiler is a slapped face or a nasty burn from the Aga. Finding a way into *King Solomon's Mines* cost two agents' lives."

The Bellman spoke again.

"The last booksplorer who went into *The Lost World* was shot by Lord Roxton."

"Gomez was an amateur," retorted Tweed. "I can take care of myself."

The Bellman thought about this for a moment, weighed up the pros and cons and then sighed.

"Okay, you're on. But I want reports every ten pages, understand? Okay. Item four--"

There was a noise from two younger members of the service who were laughing about something.

"Hey, listen up, guys. I'm not just talking for my health."

They were quiet.

"Okay. Item four: nonstandard spelling. There have been some odd spellings reported in nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts, so keep your eyes open. It's probably just texters having a bit of fun, but it just *might* be the misspelling virus coming back to life."

There was a groan from the assembled agents.

"Okay, okay, keep your hair on--I only said 'might.' Samuel Johnson's dictionary cured it after the 1744 outbreak and Lavinia-Webster and the *OED* keep it all in check, but we have to be careful of any new strains. I know this is boring, but I want *every* misspelling you come across reported and given to the Cat. He'll pass it on to Agent Libris at Text Grand Central."

He paused for effect and looked at us sternly.

"We can't let this get out of hand, people. Okay. Item five: There are thirty-one pilgrims in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* but only twenty-four stories. Mrs. Cavendish, weren't you keeping an eye on this?"

"We've been watching *Canterbury Tales* all week," said a woman dressed in the most fabulously outrageous clothes, "and every time we look away, another story gets boojummed. Someone's getting in there and erasing the story from within."

"Deane? Any idea who's behind all this?"

Daphne Farquitt's romantic lead stood up and consulted a list.

"I think I can see a pattern beginning to emerge," he said. "*The Merchant's Wife* was the first to go, followed by *The Milliner's Tale*, *The Pedlar's Cok*, *The Cuckold's Revenge*, *The Maiden's Wonderful Arse* and, most recently, *The Contest of Farts*. *The Cook's Tale* is already half gone--it looks as though whoever is doing this has a problem with the healthy vulgarity of Chaucerian texts."

"In that case," said the Bellman with a grave expression, "it looks like we have an active cell of Bowdlerizers at work again. *The Miller's Tale* will be the next to go. I want twenty-four-hour surveillance, and we should get someone on the inside. Volunteers?"

"I'll go," said Deane. "I'll take the place of the host--he won't mind."

"Good. Keep me informed of your progress."

"I say!" said Akrid Snell, putting up his hand.

"What is it, Snell?"

"If you're going to be the host, Deane, can you get Chaucer to cool it a bit on the Sir Topaz story? He's issued a writ for libel, and not to put too fine a point on it, I think we could lose our trousers over this one."

Deane nodded, and the Bellman returned to his notes.

"Item six: Now *this* I regard as kind of serious, guys."

He held up an old copy of the Bible.

"In this 1631 printing, the seventh commandment reads: *Thou shalt commit adultery*."

There was a mixture of shock and stifled giggles from the small gathering.

"I don't know who did this, but it's just not funny. Fooling around with internal Text Operating Systems might have a sort of mischievous appeal to it, but it's not big and it's not clever. The occasional bout of high spirits I might overlook, but this isn't an isolated incident. I've also got a 1716 edition that urges the faithful to *sin on more*, and a Cambridge printing from 1653 which tells us that *The unrighteous shall inherit the Kingdom of God*. Now listen, I don't want to be accused of having no sense of humor, but this is something that I *will not tolerate*. If I find out the joker who has been doing this, it'll be a month's enforced holiday inside *Ant & Bee*."

"Marlowe!" said Tweed, making it sound like a cough.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Bad cough--sorry."

The Bellman stared at Tweed for a moment, laid down the offending

Bible and looked at his watch.

"Okay, that's it for now. I'll be doing individual briefings in a few minutes. We thank Mrs. Dashwood for her hospitality, and Perkins--it's your turn to feed the Minotaur."

There was a groan from Perkins. The group started to wander off and talk to one another. The Bellman had to raise his voice to be heard.

"We go off shift in eight bells, and listen up--!"

The assembled Jurisdiction staff stopped for a moment.

"Let's be *careful* out there."

The Bellman paused, tingled his bell and everyone returned to their tasks. I caught Tweed's eye; he smiled, made a pistol out of his hand and pointed it at me. I did the same back and he laughed.

"King Pellinore," said the Bellman to a disheveled white-haired whiskery gentleman in half-armor, "there has been a sighting of the Questing Beast in the backstory of *Middlemarch*."

King Pellinore's eyes opened wide; he muttered something that sounded like "What what, hey hey?," then drew himself up to his full height, picked a helmet from a nearby table and clanked from the room. The Bellman ticked his list, consulted the next entry and turned to us.

"Next and Havisham," he said. "Something easy to begin with. Bloophole needs closing. It's in *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham, so you can go straight home afterwards."

"Good," she exclaimed. "What do we have to do?"

"Page two," explained the Bellman, consulting his clipboard. "Abel Magwitch escapes--swims, one assumes--from a prison hulk with a 'great iron' on his leg. He'd sink like a stone. No Magwitch, no escape, no career in Australia, no cash to give to Pip, no 'expectations,' no story. He's got to have the shackles still on him when he reaches the shore so Pip can fetch a file to release him, so you're going to have to footle with the backstory. Any questions?"

"No," replied Miss Havisham. "Thursday?"

"Er--no also," I replied, my head still spinning after the Bellman's speech. I was just going to walk in Miss Havisham's shadow for a bit--which was, on reflection, a very good place to be.

"Good," said the Bellman, signing a docket and tearing it off. "Take this to Wemmick in stores."

He left us and called to Foyle and the Red Queen about a missing person named Cass in *Silas Marner*.

"Did you understand any of that?" asked Miss Havisham.

"Not really."

"Good!" smiled Miss Havisham. "Confused is *exactly* how all cadets to Jurisdiction should enter their first assignment!"

## 26.

### Assignment One: Bloophole Filled in *Great Expectations*

**Bloophole:** Term used to describe a narrative hole by the author that renders his/her work seemingly impossible. An unguarded bloophole may not cause damage for millions of readings, but then, quite suddenly and catastrophically, the book may unravel itself in a very dramatic fashion. Hence the Jurisfiction saying "A switch in a line can save a lot of time."

**TextMarker:** An emergency device that outwardly resembles a flare pistol. Designed by the Jurisfiction Design & Technology department, the TextMarker allows a trapped PRO to "mark" the text of the book they are within using a predesignated code of bold, italics, underlining, etc., unique to the agent. Another agent may then jump in at the right page to effect a rescue. Works well as long as the rescuer is looking for the signal.

UNITARY AUTHORITY OF WARRINGTON CAT,  
*The Jurisfiction Guide to the Great Library* (glossary)

MISS HAVISHAM had dispatched me to get some tea and meet her back at her desk, so I walked across to the refreshments.

"Good evening, Miss Next," said a well-dressed young man in pinks and a sports jacket. He had a well-trimmed mustache and a monocle screwed into his eye; he smiled and offered me his hand to shake. "Vernham Deane, resident cad of *The Squire of High Potternews*, D. Farquitt, 246 pages, softcover PS3.99."

I shook his hand.

"I know what you're thinking," he said sadly. "No one thinks much of Daphne Farquitt, but she sells a lot of books and she's always been pretty good to me--apart from the chapter where I ravish the serving girl at Potternews Hall and then callously have her turned from the house. I didn't want to, believe me."

He looked at me with the same earnestness that Mrs. Dashwood had exhibited when explaining *her* actions in *Sense and Sensibility*. It sounded as though a preordained life could be something of a nuisance.

"I've not read the book," I told him untruthfully, unwilling to get embroiled in Farquitt plot intricacies--I could be stuck here for days.

"Ah!" he said with some relief, then added: "You have a good teacher in Miss Havisham. Solid and dependable, but a stickler for rules. There are many shortcuts here that the more mature members either frown upon or have no knowledge of; will you permit me to show you around some time?"

I was touched by the courtesy.

"Thank you, Mr. Deane--I accept."

"Vern," he said. "Call me Vern. Listen, don't rely too heavily on the ISBN numbers. The Bellman's a bit of a technophile and although the ISBN Positioning System might *seem* to have its attractions, I should keep one of Bradshaw's maps with you as a backup at all times."

"I'll bear that in mind, Vern, thanks."

"And don't worry about old Harris. His bark is a lot worse than his bite. He looks down on me because I'm from a racy potboiler, but listen--I can hold my own against him any day!"

He poured some tea for us both before continuing.

"He was trained during the days when cadets were cast into *Pilgrim's Progress* and told to make their own way out. He thinks all us young 'uns are soft as soap. Don't you, Tweed?"

He turned to meet my detractor.

Harris Tweed stood by with an empty coffee cup.

"What are you blathering about, Deane?" he asked, scowling like thunder.

"I was telling Miss Next here that you think we're all a bit soft."

Harris took a step closer, glared at Deane and then fixed me with his dark brown eyes. He was about fifty, graying, and had the sort of face that looked as though the skin had been measured upon a skull three sizes smaller before fitment.

"Has Havisham mentioned the Well of Lost Plots to you?" he asked.

"The Cat mentioned it. Unpublished books, I think he said."

"Not *just* unpublished. The Well of Lost Plots is where vague ideas ferment into sketchy plans. This is the Notion Nursery. The Word Womb. Go down there and you'll see plot outlines coalescing on the shelves like so many primordial life forms. The spirits of roughly sketched characters flit about the corridors in search of plot and dialogue before they are woven into the story. If they get lucky, the book finds a publisher and rises into the Great Library above."

"And if they're unlucky?"

"They stay in the basement. But there's more. Below the Well of Lost Plots is *another* basement. Subbasement twenty-seven. No one talks of it much. It's where deleted characters, poor plot devices, half-baked ideas and corrupt Jurisdiction agents go to spend a painful eternity. Just remember that."

I was stunned, so said nothing. Tweed glared at Deane, scowled at me, filled up his coffee cup and left. As soon as he was out of earshot, Vernham turned to me and said: "Old wives' tales. There's no such thing as basement twenty-seven."

"Sort of like using the Jabberwock to frighten children, yes?"

"Well, not really," replied Deane thoughtfully, "because there *is* a Jabberwock. Frightfully nice fellow--good at fly-fishing and plays the

bongos. I'll introduce you sometime."

I heard Miss Havisham calling my name.

"I'd better go," I told him.

Vern looked at his watch.

"Of course. Goodness, is that the time? Well, hey-ho, see you about!"

Despite Vern's assurances about Harris Tweed's threats I still felt uneasy. Was jumping into a copy of Poe from my side enough of a misdemeanor to attract Tweed's ire? And how much training would I need before I could even *attempt* to rescue Jack Schitt? I returned to Miss Havisham deep in thought about Jurisdiction and Landen and bookjumping. I noticed her desk was as far from the Red Queen's as one could get and laid her tea in front of her.

"What do you know about subbasement twenty-seven?" I asked her.

"Old wives' tales," replied Havisham, concentrating on the report she was filing. "One of the other PROs trying to frighten you?"

"Sort of."

I looked around while Miss Havisham busied herself. There seemed to be a lot of activity in the room; PROs melted in and out of the air around me with the Bellman moving around, reading instructions from his clipboard. My eyes alighted on a shiny horn that was connected to a polished wood-and-brass device on the desk by a flexible copper tube. It reminded me of a very old form of gramophone--something that Thomas Edison might have come up with.

Miss Havisham looked up, saw I was trying to read the instructions on the brass plaque and said: "It's a footnoterphone. We use them to communicate. Book-to-book or external calls, their value is incalculable. Try it out if you wish."

I took the horn and looked inside. There was a cork plug pushed into the end attached to a short chain. I looked at Miss Havisham.

"Just give the title of the book, page, character, and if you really want to be specific, line and word."

"As simple as that?"

"As simple as that."

I pulled out the plug and heard a voice say: "Operator services. Can I help you?"

"Oh! yes--er, book-to-book, please." I thought of a novel I had been reading recently and chose a page and line at random. "*It Was a Dark and Stormy Night*, page 156, line four."

"Trying to connect you. Thank you for using FNP Communications."

There were a few clicking noises and I heard a man's voice saying: ". . . and our hearts, though stout and brave, still like muffled . . ."

The operator came back on the line.

"I'm sorry, we had a crossed line. You are through now, caller."



Thank you for using FNP Communications."

Now all I could hear was the low murmur of conversation above the sound of engines of a ship. At a loss to know what to say I just gabbled: "Antonio?"

There was the sound of a confused voice, and I hurriedly replaced the plug.

"You'll get the hang of it," said Havisham kindly, putting her report down. "Paperwork! My goodness. Come along, we've got to visit Wemmick in the stores. I like him, so *you'll* like him. I won't expect you to do much on this first assignment--just stay close to me and observe. Finished your tea? We're off!"

I hadn't, of course, but Miss Havisham grabbed my elbow and before I knew it we were back in the huge entrance lobby near the Boojumorial. Our footsteps rang out on the polished floor as we crossed to one side of the vestibule, where a small counter not more than six feet wide was set into the deep red marble wall. A battered notice told us to take a number and we would be called.

"Rank must have its privileges!" cried Miss Havisham gaily as she walked to the front of the queue. A few of the Jurisdiction agents looked up, but most were too busy swotting up on their passnotes, cramming for their impending destinations.

Harris Tweed was in front of us, kitting up for his trip into *The Lost World*. On the counter before him there was a complete safari suit, knapsack, binoculars and revolver.

"--and one Rigby .416 sporting rifle, plus sixty rounds of ammunition."

The storekeeper laid a mahogany rifle box on the counter and shook his head sadly.

"Are you *sure* you wouldn't prefer an M-16? A charging stegosaurus can take some stopping, I'll be bound."

"An M-16 would be sure to raise suspicions, Mr. Wemmick. Besides, I'm a bit of a traditionalist at heart."

Mr. Wemmick sighed, shook his head and handed the clipboard to Tweed for him to sign. Harris grunted his thanks to Mr. Wemmick, signed the top copy, had the docket stamped and returned to him before he gathered up his possessions, nodded respectfully at Miss Havisham, ignored me and then murmured, ". . . *long, dark, wood-paneled corridor lined with bookshelves . . .*" before vanishing.

"Good day, Miss Havisham!" said Mr. Wemmick politely as soon as we stepped up. "And how are we this day?"

"In health, I think, Mr. Wemmick. Is Mr. Jaggers quite well?"

"Quite well to my way of thinking, I should say, Miss Havisham, quite well."

"This is Miss Next, Mr. Wemmick. She has joined us recently."

"Delighted!" remarked Mr. Wemmick, who looked every bit the way he was described in *Great Expectations*. That is to say, he was short, had a slightly pockmarked face, and had been that way for about forty years.

"Where are you two bound?"

"Home!" said Miss Havisham, laying the docket on the counter.

Mr. Wemmick picked up the piece of paper and looked at it for a moment before disappearing into the storeroom and rummaging noisily.

"The stores are indispensable for our purposes, Thursday. Wemmick quite literally writes his own inventory. It all has to be signed for and returned, of course, but there is very little that he doesn't have. Isn't that so, Mr. Wemmick?"

"Exactly so!" came a voice from behind a large pile of Turkish costumes and a realistic rubber bison.

"By the way, can you swim?" asked Miss Havisham.

"Yes."

Mr. Wemmick returned with a small pile of items.

"Life vests--life preserving, for the purpose of--two. Rope-- in case of trouble--one. Life belt--to assist Magwitch buoyancy-- one. Cash--for incidental expenses--ten shillings and fourpence. Cloak--for disguising said agents Next and Havisham, heavy-duty, black--two. Packed supper--two. Sign here."

Miss Havisham picked up the pen and paused before signing.

"We'll need my boat, Mr. Wemmick," she said lowering her voice.

"I'll footnoterphone ahead, Miss H," said Wemmick, winking broadly. "You'll find it on the jetty."

"For a man you are not bad at all, Mr. Wemmick!" said Miss Havisham. "Thursday, gather up the equipment!"

I picked up the heavy canvas bag.

"Dickens is within walking distance," explained Havisham, "but it's better practice for you if you jump us straight there-- there are over fifty thousand miles of shelf space."

"Ah--okay, I know how to do that," I muttered, putting down the bag, taking out my travel book and flicking to the passage about the library.

"Hold on to me as you jump, and think *Dickens* as you read."

So I did, and within a trice we were at the right place in the library.

"How was that?" I asked, quite proudly.

"Not bad," said Havisham. "But you forgot the bag."

"Sorry."

"I'll wait while you get it."

So I read myself back to the lobby, retrieved the bag to a few friendly jibes from Deane, and returned--but by accident to where a

series of adventure books for plucky girls by Charles *Pickens* were stored. I sighed, read the library passage again and was soon with Miss Havisham.

"This is the outings book," she said without looking up from one of the reading desks. "Name, destination, date, time-- I've filled it in already. Are you armed?"

"Always. Do you expect any trouble?"

Miss Havisham drew out her small pistol, released the twin barrels, pivoted it upwards and gave me one of her more serious stares.

"I *always* expect trouble, Thursday. I was on HPD-- Heathcliff Protection Duty--in *Wuthering Heights* for two years, and believe me, the ProCaths tried everything. I personally saved him from assassination eight times."

She extracted a spent cartridge, replaced it with a live one and locked the barrels back into place.

"But *Great Expectations*? Where's the danger there?"

She rolled up her sleeve and showed me a livid scar on her forearm.

"Things can turn pretty ugly even in *Toytown*," she explained. "Believe me, Larry is no lamb--I was lucky to escape with my life."

I must have been looking nervous, because she said: "Everything okay? You can bail out whenever you want, you know. Say the word and you'll be back in Swindon before you can say 'Mrs. Hubbard.' "

It wasn't a threat. She was giving me a way out. I thought of Landen and the baby. I'd survived the book sales and *Jane Eyre* with no ill effects--how hard could "footling" with the backstory of a Dickens novel be? Besides, I needed all the practice I could get.

"Ready when you are, Miss Havisham."

She nodded, rolled down her sleeve again, pulled *Great Expectations* from the bookshelf and opened it on one of the reading desks.

"We need to go in *before* the story really begins, so this is *not* a standard bookjump. Are you paying attention?"

"Yes, Miss Havisham."

"Good. I've no desire to go through this more than once. First, read us into the book."

I opened the book and read aloud from the first page, making quite sure I had hold of the bag this time:

". . . Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon toward evening. At such a time I found out for certain that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above,

were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dikes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all, and beginning to cry, was Pip. . . ."

And there we were, in amongst the gravestones at the beginning of *Great Expectations*, the chill and dampness in the air, the fog drifting in from the sea. On the far side of the graveyard a small boy was crouched among the weathered stones, talking to himself as he stared at two gravestones set to one side. But there was someone else there. In fact, there were a *group* of people, digging away at an area just outside the churchyard walls. They were illuminated in the fading light by two electric lamps powered by a small generator that hummed to itself some distance away.

"Who are they?" I whispered.

"Okay," hissed Havisham, not hearing me straightaway, "now we jump to wherever we want by--What did you say?"

I nodded in the direction of the group. One of their number pushed a wheelbarrow along a plank and dumped it onto a large heap of spoil.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Miss Havisham, walking briskly toward the small group. "It's Commander Bradshaw!"

I trotted after her and I soon saw that the digging was of an archaeological nature. Pegs were set in the ground and joined by lengths of string, delineating the area in which the volunteers were scraping with trowels, all trying to make as little noise as possible. Sitting on a folding safari seat was a man dressed like a big game hunter. He wore a safari suit and pith helmet and sported both a monocle and a large and bushy mustache. He was also barely three feet tall. When he got up from his chair, he was shorter.

"'pon my word, it's the Havisham girlie!" he said in a hoarse whisper. "You're looking younger every time I see you!"

Miss Havisham thanked him and introduced me. Bradshaw shook me by the hand and welcomed me to Jurisfiction.

"What are you up to, Trafford?" asked Havisham.

"Archaeology for the Charles Dickens Foundation, m'girl. A few of their scholars are of the belief that *Great Expectations* began not in this churchyard but in Pip's house when his parents were still alive. There is no manuscriptual evidence, so we thought we'd have a little dig

around the environs and see if we could pick up any evidence of previously overwritten scenes."

"Any luck?"

"We've struck a reworked idea that ended up in *Our Mutual Friend*, a few dirty limericks and an unintelligible margin squiggle--but nothing much."

Havisham wished him well, and we said our goodbyes and left them to their dig.

"Is that unusual?"

"You'll find around here that there is not much that *is* usual," replied Havisham. "It's what makes this job so enjoyable. Where did we get to?"

"We were going to jump into the pre-book backstory."

"I remember. To jump forwards we have only to concentrate on the page number or, if you prefer, a specific event. To go backwards *before* the first page we have to think of *negative* page numbers or an event that we assume had happened before the book began."

"How do I picture a negative page number?"

"Visualize something--an albatross, say."

"Yes?"

"Okay, now take the albatross away."

"Yes?"

"Now take *another* albatross away."

"How can I? There are no albatrosses left!"

"Okay; imagine I have lent you an albatross to make up your seabird deficit. How many albatrosses have you now?"

"None."

"Good. Now relax while I take my albatross back."

I shivered as a coldness swept through me and for a fleeting moment an empty vaguely albatross-shaped void opened and closed in front of me. But the strange thing was, for that briefest moment I *understood* the principle involved--but then it was gone like a dream upon waking. I blinked and stared at Havisham.

"That," she announced, "was a negative albatross. Now you try it--only use page numbers instead of albatrosses."

I tried hard to picture a negative page number, but it didn't work and I found myself in the garden of Satis House, watching two boys square up for a fight. Miss Havisham was soon beside me.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm trying--"

"You are *not*, my girl. There are two sorts of people in this world, doers and tryers. You are the latter and I am trying to make you the former. Now concentrate, girl!"

So I had another attempt at the negative page number idea and this

time found myself in a curious tableau *resembling* the graveyard in Chapter One but with the graves, wall and church little more than cardboard cutouts. The two featured characters, Magwitch and Pip, were also very two-dimensional and as still as statues--except that their eyes swiveled to look at me as I jumped in.

"Oi," hissed Magwitch between clenched teeth, not moving a muscle. "Piss off."

"I'm sorry?"

"Piss off!" repeated Magwitch, this time more angrily.

I was just pondering over all this when Havisham caught up with me, grabbed my hand and jumped to where we were meant to be.

"What was that?" I asked.

"The frontispiece. You're not a natural at this, are you?"

"I'm afraid not," I replied, feeling like a bit of a clot.

"Never mind," said Miss Havisham in a kindlier tone, "we'll make a Prose Resource Operative out of you yet."

We walked down the darkened jetty to where Havisham's boat was moored. But it wasn't any old boat. It was a polished-wood and gleaming-chrome Riva. I stepped aboard the beautifully built motor launch and stowed the gear as Miss Havisham sat in the skipper's seat.

Miss Havisham seemed to take on a new lease of life when confronted by anything with a powerful engine. I cast off when she ordered me to and pushed off into the oily black waters of the Thames. The boat rocked slightly as I sat down next to Havisham, who fired up the twin Chevrolet petrol engines with a throaty growl and then gently piloted our way into the darkness of the river. I pulled two cloaks from the bag, donned one and took the other to Miss Havisham, who was standing at the helm, the wind blowing through her gray hair and tugging at her tattered veil.

"Isn't this a bit anachronistic?" I asked.

"Officially yes," replied Havisham, weaving to avoid a small jolly-boat, "but we're actually in the backstory minus one day, so I could have brought in a squadron of hurricanes and the entire Ringling Brothers circus and no one would be any the wiser. If we had to do this any time *during* the book then we'd be stuck with whatever was available--which can be a nuisance."

We were moving upriver against a quickening tide. It had gone midnight and I was glad of the cloak. Billows of fog blew in from the sea and gathered in great banks that caused Miss Havisham to slow down; within twenty minutes the fog had closed in and we were alone in the cold and clammy darkness. Miss Havisham shut down the engines and doused the navigation lights, and we gently drifted in with the tide.

"Sandwich and soup?" said Miss Havisham, peering in the picnic basket.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Do you want my wagonwheel?"

"I was about to offer you mine."

We heard the prison ships before we saw them, the sound of men coughing and cursing and the occasional shout of fear. Miss Havisham started the engines and idled slowly in the direction of the sounds. Then the mist parted and we could see the prison hulk appear in front of us as a large black shape that rose from the water, the only light visible the oil lamps that flickered through the gunports. The old man-of-war was secured fore and aft by heavily rusted anchor chains against which flotsam had collected in a tangle. After checking the name of the ship Miss Havisham slowed down and stopped the engines. We drifted down the flanks of the prison hulk, and I used the boathook to fend us off. The gunports were above us and out of reach, but as we moved silently down the ship we came across a homemade rope draped from a window on the upper gun deck. I quickly fastened the boat to a projecting ring, and the motor launch swung around and settled facing the current.

"Now what?" I hissed.

Miss Havisham pointed to the life preserver, and I quickly tied it onto the end of the homemade rope.

"That's it?" I asked.

"That's it," replied Miss Havisham. "Not much to it, is there? Wait--! Look there!"

She pointed to the side of the prison hulk, where a strange creature had attached itself to one of the gunports. It had large batlike wings folded untidily across the back of its body, which was covered by patchy tufts of matted fur. It had a face like a fox, sad brown eyes and a long thin beak that was inserted deep into the wood of the gunport. It was oblivious to us both and made quiet sucky noises as it fed.

Miss Havisham raised her pistol and fired. The bullet struck close by the strange creature, which uttered a startled cry of "Gawk!," unfolded its large wings and flew off into the night.

"Blast!" said Miss Havisham, lowering her gun and pushing the safety back on. "Missed!"

The noise had alerted the guards on the deck.

"Who's there?" yelled one. "You had better be on the king's business or by St. George you'll feel the lead from my musket!"

"It's Miss Havisham," replied Havisham in a vexed tone, "on Jurisdiction business, Sergeant Wade."

"Begging your pardon, Miss Havisham," replied the guard apologetically, "but we heard a gunshot!"

"That was me," yelled Havisham. "You have grammasites on your ship!"

"Really?" replied the guard, leaning out and looking around. "I don't see anything."

"It's gone now, you dozy idiot," said Havisham to herself, quickly adding: "Well, keep a good lookout in future--if you see any more I want to know about them *immediately!*"

Sergeant Wade assured her he would, bade us both goodnight, then disappeared from view.

"What on earth is a grammasite?" I asked, looking nervously about in case the odd-looking creature should return.

"A parasitic life form that live inside books and feed on grammar," explained Havisham. "I'm no expert, of course, but that one looked suspiciously like an adjectivore. Can you see the gunport it was feeding on?"

"Yes."

"Describe it to me."

I looked at the gunport and frowned. I had expected it to be old or dark or wooden or rotten or wet, but it wasn't. But then it wasn't sterile or blank or empty either--it was simply a gunport, nothing more nor less.

"The adjectivore feeds on the adjectives *describing* the noun," explained Havisham, "but it generally leaves the noun intact. We have verminators who deal with them, but there are not enough grammasites in Dickens to cause any serious damage--yet."

"How do they move from one book to the next?" I asked, wondering if Mycroft's bookworms weren't some sort of grammasite-in-reverse.

"They seep through the covers using a process called oozemosis. That's why individual bookshelves are never more than six feet long in the library--you'd be well advised to follow the same procedure at home. I've seen grammasites strip a library to nothing but indigestible nouns and page numbers. Ever read Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*?"

"Yes."

"Grammasites."

"I have a lot to learn," I said softly.

"Agreed," replied Havisham. "I'm trying to get the Cat to write an updated travelbook that includes a bestiary, but he has a lot to do in the library--and holding a pen is tricky with paws. Come on, let's get out of this fog and see what this motor launch can do."

As soon as we were clear of the prison ship, Havisham started the engines and slowly powered back the way we had come, once again keeping a careful eye on the compass but even so nearly running aground six times.

"How did you know Sergeant Wade?"



"As the Jurisdiction representative in *Great Expectations* it is my business to know everybody. If there are any problems, then they must be brought to my attention."

"Do all books have a rep?"

"All the ones that have been brought within the controlling sphere of Jurisdiction."

The fog didn't lift. We spent the rest of that cold night steering in amongst the moored boats at the side of the river. Only when dawn broke did we see enough to manage a sedate ten knots.

We returned the boat to the jetty and Havisham insisted I jump us both back to her room at Satis House, which I managed to accomplish at the first attempt, something that helped me recover some lost confidence over the debacle with the frontispiece. I lit some candles and saw her to bed before returning alone to the stores, and Wemmick. I had the second half of the docket signed, filled out a form for a missing life vest and was about to return home when a very scratched and bruised Harris Tweed appeared from nowhere and approached the counter where I was standing. His clothes were tattered and he had lost one boot and most of his kit. It looked like *The Lost World* hadn't really agreed with him. He caught my eye and pointed a finger at me.

"Don't say a word. Not a *single* word!"

Pickwick was still awake when I got in even though it was nearly 6 a.m. There were two messages on the answer machine--one from Cordelia, and another from a *very annoyed* Cordelia.

## Landen and Joffy Again

George Formby was born George Hoy Booth in Wigan in 1904. He followed his father into the music hall business, adopted the ukulele as his trademark and by the time the war broke out was a star of variety, pantomime and film. During the first years of the war, he and his wife, Beryl, toured extensively for ENSA, entertaining the troops as well as making a series of highly successful movies. By 1942 he and Gracie Fields stood alone as the nation's favorite entertainers. When invasion of England was inevitable, many influential dignitaries and celebrities were shipped out to Canada. George and Beryl elected to stay and fight, as George put it, "to the last bullet on the end of Wigan pier!" Moving underground with the English resistance and various stalwart regiments of the Local Defense Volunteers, Formby manned the outlawed "Wireless St. George" and broadcast songs, jokes and messages to secret receivers across the country. Always in hiding, always moving, the Formbys used their numerous contacts in the north to smuggle allied airmen to neutral Wales and form resistance cells that harried the Nazi invaders. Hitler's order of 1944 to "have all ukuleles and banjos in England burnt" was a clear indication of how serious a threat he was considered to be. George's famous comment after peace was declared, "ee, turned out nice again!," became a national catchphrase. In postwar republican England he was made nonexecutive president for life, a post he held until his assassination.

JOHN WILLIAMS,

*The Extraordinary Career of George Formby*

IT WAS AFTER TWO or three days of plain Litera Tec work and a dull weekend without Landen that I found myself lying awake and staring at the ceiling, listened to the clink-clink of milk bottles and the click-click of Pickwick's feet on the linoleum as she meandered around the kitchen. Sleep patterns never came out quite right in reengineered species; no one knew why. There had been no *major* coincidences over the past few days, although on the night of Joffy's exhibition the two SpecOps-5 agents who had been assigned to watch Slorter and Lamme died in their car as a result of carbon monoxide poisoning. It seemed their car had a faulty exhaust. Lamme and Slorter had been following me around very indiscreetly for the past two days. I just let them get on with it; they weren't bothering me--or my unseen assailant. If they had, they'd as likely as not be dead.

But there was more than just SO-5 to worry about. In three days the world would be reduced to a sticky mass of sugar and proteins--or so my father said. I had seen the pink and gooey world for myself, too, but then I had *also* seen myself shot at Cricklade Skyrail station, so the future wasn't *exactly* immutable--thank goodness. There had been no advance on the forensic report; the pink slime matched to no known chemical compound. Coincidentally, next Thursday was also the day of the general election, and Yorrick Kaine looked set to make some

serious political gain thanks to his "generous" sharing of *Cardenio*. Mind you, he was still taking no chances--the first public unveiling of the text was not until the day *after* the election. The thing was, if the pink gunge got a hold, Yorrick Kaine could have the shortest career as a prime minister ever. Indeed, next Thursday could be the last Thursday for all of us.

I closed my eyes and thought of Landen. He was there as I best remembered him: seated in his study with his back to me, oblivious to everything, writing. The sunlight streamed in through the window and the familiar clackety-clack of his old Underwood typewriter sounded like a fond melody to my ears. He stopped occasionally to look at what he had written, make a correction with the pencil clenched between his teeth, or just pause for pause's sake. I leaned on the doorframe for a while and smiled to myself. He mumbled a line he had written, chuckled to himself and typed faster for a moment, hitting the carriage return with a flourish. He typed quite animatedly in this fashion for about five minutes until he stopped, took out the pencil and slowly turned to face me.

"Hey, Thursday."

"Hey, Landen. I didn't want to disturb you; shall I--?"

"No, no," he said hurriedly, "this can wait. I'm just pleased to see you. How's it going out there?"

"Boring," I told him despondently. "After Jurisfiction, SpecOps work seems as dull as ditchwater. Flanker at SO-1 is still on my back, I can feel Goliath breathing down my neck, and this Lavoisier character is using me to get to Dad."

"Can I do anything to help?"

So I sat on his lap and he massaged the back of my neck. It was heaven.

"How's Junior?"

"Junior is smaller than a broadbean--little more to the left--but making himself known. The Lucozade keeps the nausea at bay most of the time; I must have drunk a swimming pool of it by now."

There was a pause.

"Is it mine?" he asked.

I held him tightly but said nothing. He understood and patted my shoulder.

"Let's talk about something else. How are you getting along at Jurisfiction?"

"Well," I said, blowing my nose loudly, "I'm not a natural at this bookjumping lark. I want you back, Land, but I'm only going to get one shot at 'The Raven,' and I need to get it right. I've not heard from Havisham for nearly three days--I don't know when the next assignment will be."

Landen shook his head slowly.

"Sweetness, I don't want you to go into 'The Raven.' "

I looked up at him.

"You heard me. Leave Jack Schitt where he is. How many people would have died for him to make a packet out of that plasma rifle scam? One thousand? Ten thousand? Listen, your memory may grow fuzzy, but I'll still be here, the good times--"

"But I don't want just the good times, Land. I want *all* the times. The shitty ones, the arguments, that annoying habit you had of always trying to make the next filling station and running out of petrol. Picking your nose, farting in bed. But more than that, I want the times that haven't happened yet--the future. *Our* future! I *am* getting Schitt out, Land--make no mistake about that."

"Let's talk about something else *again*," said Landen. "Listen-- I'm a bit worried about someone trying to kill you with coincidences."

"I can look after myself."

He looked at me solemnly.

"I don't doubt it for one moment. But I'm only alive in your memories--and some mewling and puking ones of my mum's I suppose--and without you I'm nothing at all, *ever*--so if whoever is juggling with entropy gets lucky next time, you and I are both for the high jump--but at least you get a memorial and a SpecOps regulation headstone."

"I see your point, however muddled you might make it. Did you see how I manipulated coincidences in the last entropic lapse to find Mrs. Nakajima? Clever, eh?"

"Inspired. Now, can you think of *any* linking factor--except the intended victim--that connects the three attacks?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I've thought it through a thousand times. Nothing."

Landen thought for a moment, tapped a finger on his temple and smiled.

"Don't be so sure. I've been having a little peek myself, and, well, I want to show you something."

And there we were, on the platform of the Skyrail station at South Cerney. But it wasn't a moving memory, like the other ones I had enjoyed with Landen, it was frozen like a stilled video image--and like a stilled video image, it wasn't very good; all blurry and a bit jumpy.

"Okay, what now?" I asked as we walked along the platform.

"Have a look at everyone. See if there is anyone you recognize."

I stepped onto the shuttle and walked round the players in the fiasco, who were frozen like statues. The faces that were most distinct were the neanderthal driver-operator, the well-heeled woman, the

woman with Pixie Frou-Frou and the woman with the crossword. The rest were vague shapes, generic female human forms and little else--no mnemonic tags to make them unique. I pointed them out.

"Good," said Landen, "but what about her?"

And there she was, the young woman sitting on the bench in the station, doing her face in a makeup mirror. We walked closer and I looked intently at the nondescript face that loomed dimly out of my memory.

"I only glimpsed her for a moment, Land. Slightly built, mid-twenties, red shoes. So what?"

"She was here when you arrived, she's on the southbound platform, all trains go to all stops--yet she *didn't* get the Skyrail. Suspicious?"

"Not really."

"No," said Landen, sounding crestfallen, "not exactly a smoking gun, is it? Unless," he smiled, "unless you look at this."

The Skyrail station folded back to be replaced by the area near the Uffington white horse on the day of the picnic. I looked up nervously. The large Hispano-Suiza automobile was hanging motionless in the air not fifty feet up.

"Anything spring to mind?" asked Landen.

I looked around carefully. It was another bizarre frozen vignette. Everyone and everything was there--Major Fairwelle, Sue Long, my old croquet captain, the mammoths, the gingham tablecloth, even the bootleg cheese. I looked at Landen.

"Nothing, Land."

"Are you sure? Look again."

I sighed and scanned their faces. Sue Long, an old school friend whose boyfriend set his own trousers on fire for a bet; Sarah Nara, who lost her ear at Bilohirsk on a training accident and ended up marrying General Spottiswode; croquet pro Alf Widdershaine, who taught me how to "peg out" all the way from the forty-yard line. Even the previously unknown Bonnie Voige was there, and--

"Who's this?" I asked, pointing at a shimmering memory in front of me.

"It's the woman who called herself Violet De'ath," answered Landen. "Does she seem familiar?"

I looked at her blank features. I hadn't given her a second thought at the time, but something about her *was* familiar.

"Sort of," I responded. "Have I seen her somewhere before?"

"You tell me, Thursday," Landen said, shrugging. "It's *your* memory. But if you want a clue, look at her shoes."

And there they were. Bright red shoes that just *might* have been the same ones on the girl at the Skyrail platform.

"There's more than one pair of red shoes in Wessex, Land."

"You're right," he observed. "I did say it was a long shot."

I had an idea, and before Landen could say another word we were in the square at Osaka with all the Nextian-logoed Japanese, the fortune-teller frozen in mid-beckon, the crowd around us an untidy splash of visual noise that is the way crowds appear to the mind's eye, the logos I remembered jutting out in sharp contrast to the unremembered faces. I peered through the crowd as I anxiously searched for anything that might resemble a young European woman.

"See anything?" asked Landen, hands on hips and surveying the strange scene.

"No," I replied. "Wait a minute, let's come in a bit earlier."

I took myself back a minute and there she was, getting up from the fortune-teller's chair the moment I first saw him. I walked closer and looked at the vague shape. I squinted at her feet. There, in the haziest corner of my mind, was the memory I was looking for. The shoes were *definitely* red.

"It's her, isn't it?" asked Landen.

"Yes," I murmured, staring at the wraithlike figure in front of me. "But it doesn't help; none of these memories are strong enough for a positive ID."

"Perhaps not on their *own*," observed Landen. "But since I've been in here I've figured out a few things about how your memory works. Try and *superimpose* the images."

I thought of the woman on the platform, placed her across the vague form in the market and then added the specter who had called herself De'ath. The three images shimmered for a bit before they locked together. It wasn't great. I needed more. I pulled from my memory the half-shredded picture that Lamme and Slorter had shown me. It fitted perfectly, and Landen and I stared at the result.

"What do you think?" asked Landen. "Twenty-five?"

"Possibly a little older," I muttered, looking closer at the amalgam of my attacker, trying to fix it in my memory. She had plain features, a small amount of makeup and blond hair cut in an asymmetric bob. She didn't look like a killer. I ran through all the information I had--which didn't take long. The failed SpecOps-5 investigations allowed me a few clues: the recurring name of Hades, the initials A.H., the fact that she *did* resolve on pictures. Clearly it wasn't Acheron in disguise, but perhaps--

"Oh, *shit*."

"What?"

"It's Hades."

"It can't be. You killed him."

"I killed *Acheron*. He had a brother named Styx--why couldn't he have a sister?"

We exchanged nervous looks and stared at the mnemonograph in front of us. Some of her features *did* seem to resemble Acheron now that I stared at her. Like Hades, she was tall and her lips were thin. That alone would not have been enough; after all, many people are tall with thin lips, and few, if any, are evil geniuses. But her eyes were unmistakable--they had a sort of brooding *darkness* to them.

"No wonder she's pissed off with you," murmured Landen. "You killed her brother."

"Thanks for that, Landen," I replied. "Always know how to relax a girl."

"Sorry. So we know the H in A.H. is *Hades*--what about the A?"

"The Acheron was a tributary of the river Styx," I said quietly. "As was the Phlegethon, Cocytus, Lethe--and *Aornis*."

I'd never felt so depressed at having identified a suspect before. But something was niggling at me. There was something here that I *couldn't* see, like listening to a TV from another room. You hear dramatic music but you have no idea what's going on.

"Cheer up," smiled Landen, rubbing my shoulder, "she's ballsed it up three times already--it might never happen!"

"There's something *else*, Landen."

"What?"

"Something I've forgotten. Something I never remembered. Something about--I don't know."

"It's no good asking me," replied Landen. "I may *seem* real to you, but I'm not--I'm only here as your *memory* of me. I can't know any more than you do."

Aornis had vanished and Landen was starting to fade.

"You've got to go now," he said in a hollow-sounding voice. "Remember what I said about Jack Schitt."

"Don't go!" I yelled. "I want to stay here for a bit. It's not much fun out here at the moment, I think it's Miles's baby, Aornis wants to kill me and Goliath and Flanker--"

But it was too late. I'd woken up. I was still in bed, undressed, bedclothes rumpled. The clock told me it was a few minutes past nine. I stared at the ceiling in a forlorn mood, wondering how I could really have got myself into such a mess, and then wondering if there was anything I could have done to prevent it. I decided, on the face of it, probably not. This, to my fuddled way of thinking, I took to be a positive sign, so I slipped on a T-shirt and shuffled into the kitchen, filled the kettle and put some dried apricots in Pickwick's bowl after trying and failing once again to get her to stand on one leg.

I shook the entroposcope just in case--was thankful to find everything normal--and was just checking the fridge for some fresh

milk when the doorbell rang. I trotted out to the hall, picked up my automatic from the table and asked: "Who is it?"

"Open the door, Doofus."

I put the gun away and opened the door. Joffy smiled at me as he entered and raised his eyebrows at my disheveled state.

"Half day today?"

"I don't feel like working now that Landen's gone."

"Who?"

"Never mind. Coffee?"

We walked into the kitchen. Joffy patted Pickwick on the head, and I emptied the old grounds out of the coffee jug. He sat down at the table.

"Seen Dad recently?"

"Last week. He was fine. How much did you make on the art sale?"

"Over PS2,000 in commission. I thought of using the cash to repair the church roof but then figured, what the hell--I'll just blow it on drink, curry and prostitutes."

I laughed.

"Sure you will, Joff."

I rinsed some mugs and stared out of the window.

"What can I do for you, Joff?"

"I came round to pick up Miles's things."

I stopped what I was doing and turned to face him.

"Say that again."

"I said I'd come--"

"I *know* what you said, but, but--how do you know Miles?"

Joffy laughed, saw I was serious, frowned at me and then remarked: "He *said* you didn't recognize him that night at Vole Towers. Is everything okay?"

I shrugged. "Not really, Joff--but tell me: How do you know him?"

"We're going out, Thurs--surely you can't have forgotten?"

"You and Miles?"

"Sure! Why not?"

This was *very* good news indeed.

"Then his clothes are in my apartment because--"

--we borrow it every now and then."

I tried to grasp the facts.

"You borrow my apartment because it's . . . secret--?"

"Right. You know how old-fashioned SpecOps are when it comes to their staff fraternizing with clerics."

I laughed out loud and wiped away the tears that had sprung to my eyes.

"Sis?" said Joffy, getting up. "What's the matter?"

I hugged him tightly.



"Nothing's the matter, Joff. Everything's *wonderful!*--I'm not carrying his baby!"

"Miles?" said Joff. "Wouldn't know how. Wait a minute, sis--you've got a bun in the oven? Who's the father?"

I smiled through my tears.

"It's Landen's," I said with a renewed confidence. "By God it's Landen's!"

And I jumped up and down overwhelmed by the sheer joy of the fact, and Joffy, who had nothing better to do, joined me in jumping up and down until Mrs. Scroggins in the apartment below banged on the ceiling with a broom handle.

"Sister dearest," said Joffy as soon as we had stopped, "who in St. Zvlkx's name is Landen?"

"Landen Parke-Laine," I gabbled happily. "The ChronoGuard eradicated him, but something *other* happened and I still have his child, so it's all *meant* to come out right, don't you see? And I *have* to get him back because if Aornis *does* get to me then he'll *never* exist ever ever ever--and neither will the baby and I can't stand that idea and I've been farting around for too long so I'm going to go into 'The Raven' no matter what-- because *if I don't I'm going to go nuts!*"

"I'm more than happy for you," said Joffy slowly. "You've completely lost your tiny doofus-like mind, but I'm very happy for you, in spite of it."

I ran into the living room, rummaged across my desk until I found Schitt-Hawse's calling card and rang the number. He answered in less than two rings.

"Ah, Next," he said with a triumphant air. "Changed your mind?"

"I'll go into 'The Raven' for you, Schitt-Hawse. Double-cross me and I'll maroon both you and your half brother in the worst Daphne Farquitt novel I can find. Believe me, I can do it--and will do it, if necessary."

There was a pause.

"I'll send a car to pick you up."

The phone went dead and I placed the receiver back on the cradle. I took a deep breath, shooed Joffy out of the door once he had collected Miles's stuff, then had a shower and got dressed. My mind was set. I would get Landen back, no matter what the risks. I was still lacking a coherent plan, but this didn't bother me that much--I seldom did.

## 28.

### "The Raven"

"The Raven" was undoubtedly Edgar Allan Poe's finest and most famous poem, and was his own personal favorite, being the one he most liked to recite at poetry readings. Published in 1845, the poem drew heavily on Elizabeth Barrett's "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," something he acknowledged in the original dedication but had conveniently forgotten when explaining how he wrote "The Raven" in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition"--the whole affair tending to make nonsense of Poe's attacks on Longfellow as a plagiarist. A troubled genius, Poe also suffered the inverse cash/ fame law--the more famous he became, the less money he had. "The Gold Bug," one of his most popular short stories, sold over 300,000 copies but netted him only \$100. With "The Raven" he fared even worse. Poe's total earnings for one of the greatest poems in the English language were a paltry \$9.

MILLON DE FLOSS,  
*Who Put the Poe in Poem?*

**T**HE DOORBELL RANG as I was putting my shoes on. But it wasn't Goliath. It was Agents Lamme and Slorter. I was really quite glad to see that they were still alive; perhaps Aornis didn't regard them as a threat. I wouldn't.

"Her name's Aornis Hades," I told them as I hopped up and down, trying to pull my other shoe on, "sister of Acheron. Don't even *think* of tackling her. You know you're close when you stop breathing."

"Wow!" exclaimed Lamme, patting his pockets for a pen. "Aornis Hades! How did you figure that out?"

"I glimpsed her several times over the past few weeks."

"You must have a good memory," observed Slorter.

"I have help."

Lamme found a pen, discovered it didn't work and borrowed a pencil off his partner. The point broke. I lent him mine.

"What was her name again?"

I spelled it out for him and he wrote it down so slowly it was painful.

"Good!" I said once they had finished. "What are you guys doing here, anyway?"

"Flanker wants a word."

"I'm busy."

"You're not busy anymore," replied Slorter, looking very awkward and wringing her hands. "I'm sorry about this--but you're under arrest."

"What for *now*?"

"Possession of an illegal substance."

This was an interesting development. He'd obviously not found the cause of tomorrow's Armageddon and was attempting a little framing to make me compliant. I had thought he would try something of the sort, but now wasn't the time. I had a appointment in "The Raven" I needed to keep.

"Listen, guys, I'm not just busy, I'm *really* busy, and Flanker sending you along with some bullshit trumped-up charge is just wasting your time and mine."

"It's *not* trumped up," said Slorter, holding out an arrest warrant. "It's cheese. *Illegal* cheese. SO-1 found a block of flattened cheese under a Hispano-Suiza with your prints all over it. It was part of a cheese seizure, Thursday. It should have been consigned to the furnaces."

I groaned. It was just what Flanker wanted. A simple internal charge that usually meant a reprimand--but could, if needed, result in a custodial sentence. A solid gold arm-twister, in other words. Before the two agents could even draw breath I had slammed the door in their faces and was heading out the fire escape. I heard them yell at me as I ran out onto the road, just in time to be picked up by Schitt-Hawse. It was the first and last time I would ever be pleased to see him.

So there I was, unsure if I had just got out of the frying pan and into the fire or out of the fire and into the frying pan. I had been frisked for weapons and a wire and they had taken my automatic, keys and Jurisdiction travelbook. Schitt-Hawse drove and I was sitting in the backseat--wedged tightly between Chalk and Cheese.

"I'm kind of glad to see you, in a funny sort of way."

There was no answer, so I waited ten minutes and then asked: "Where are we going?"

This didn't elicit a response either, so I patted Chalk and Cheese on the knees and said: "You guys been on holiday this year?"

Chalk looked at me for a moment, then looked at Cheese and answered: "We went to Majorca," before he lapsed back into silence.

An hour later we arrived at Goliath's Research & Development Facility at Aldermaston. Surrounded by triple fences of razor wire and armed guards patrolling with full-sized sabertooths, the complex was a labyrinth of aluminum-clad windowless buildings and concrete bunkers interspersed with electrical substations and large ventilation ducts. We were waved through the gate and parked in a layby next to a large marble Goliath logo where Chalk, Cheese and Schitt-Hawse offered up a short prayer of contrition and unfailing devotion to the corporation. That done, we were on our way again past thousands of

yards of pipework, buildings, parked military vehicles, trucks and all manner of junk.

"Be honored, Next," said Schitt-Hawse. "Few are blessed with seeing this far into the workings of our beloved corporation."

"I feel more humbled by the second, Mr. Schitt-Hawse."

We drove on to a low building with a domed concrete roof. This was of an even higher security than the main entrance, and Chalk, Cheese and Schitt-Hawse had to have their half-windsor tie knots scanned for verification. The guard on duty opened a heavy blast door that led to a brightly lit corridor which in turn contained a row of elevators. We descended to lower ground twelve, went through another security check and then along a shiny corridor past doors either side of us that had brass placards screwed to the polished wood explaining what went on inside. We walked past *Electronic Computing Engines*, *Tachyon Communications*, *Square Peg in a Round Hole* and stopped at *The Book Project*. Schitt-Hawse opened the door and we entered.

The room was quite like Mycroft's laboratory apart from the fact that the devices seemed to have been built to a much higher degree of quality and had actually cost some money. Where my uncle's machines were held together with baler twine, cardboard and rubber solution glue, the machines in here had all been crafted from high-quality alloys. All the testing apparatus looked brand-new, and there was not an atom of dust anywhere. It was chaos--but *refined* chaos. There were about a half-dozen technicians, all of whom seemed to have a certain pallid disposition as though they spent most of their life indoors, and they looked at us curiously as we walked in--I don't suppose they saw many strange faces. In the middle of the room was a doorway a little like a walk-through metal detector; it was tightly wrapped with thousands of yards of fine copper wire. The wire ended in a tight bunch the width of a man's arm that led away to a large machine that hummed and clicked to itself. As we walked in, a technician pulled a switch, there was a crackle and a puff of smoke, and everything went dead. It was a Prose Portal, but more relevant to the purposes of this narrative, it didn't work.

I pointed to the copper-bound doorway in the middle of the room. It had started to smoke, and the technicians were now trying to put it out with CO2 extinguishers.

"Is that *thing* meant to be a Prose Portal?"

"Sadly, yes," admitted Schitt-Hawse. "As you may or may not know, all we managed to synthesize was a form of curdled stodgy gunge from volumes one to eight of *The World of Cheese*."

"Jack Schitt said it was cheddar."

"Jack always tended to exaggerate a little, Miss Next. This way."

We walked past a large hydraulic press which was rigged in an attempt to open one of the books that I had seen at Mrs. Nakajima's apartment. The steel press groaned and strained but the book remained firmly shut. Further on a technician was valiantly attempting to burn a hole in another book, with similar poor results, and after that another technician was looking at an X-ray photograph of the book. He was having a little trouble as two or three thousand pages of text and numerous other "enclosures" all sandwiched together didn't lend themselves to easy examination.

"What do these books do, Next?"

I was in no mood for a show-and-tell; I was here to get Landen back, nothing more.

"Do you want me to get Jack Schitt out or not?"

He stared at me for a moment before dropping the subject and walking on past several other experiments, down a short corridor and through a large steel door to another room that contained a table, chair--and Lavoisier. He was reading the copy of *The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* as we entered. He looked up.

"Monsieur Lavoisier, I understand you already know Miss Next?" asked Schitt-Hawse.

"We did some time together," I replied slowly, staring at Lavoisier, who seemed a great deal older and distinctly ill at ease with the situation. I got the impression he didn't like Goliath any more than I did. He didn't say anything; he just nodded his head in greeting, shut the book and rose to his feet. We stood in silence for a moment.

"So go on," said Schitt-Hawse finally, "do your booky stuff, and Lavoisier will reactualize your husband as though nothing had happened. No one will ever know he had gone--except you, of course."

I bit my lip. This was one of the biggest chances I was ever likely to take. I would try and capitalize on Lavoisier's apparent dislike of Goliath--after all, the ChronoGuard had no interest in Landen or Jack Schitt--and there was more than one way to trap my father. I was going to have to risk it.

"I need more than just your promise, Schitt-Hawse."

"It's not *my* promise, Next--it's a Goliath Guarantee. Believe me, it's riveted iron."

"So was the *Titanic*," I replied. "In my experience a Goliath Guarantee guarantees *nothing*."

He stared at me and I stared back.

"Then what do you want?" he asked.

"One: I want Landen reactualized as he was. Two: I want my travelbook back and safe conduct from here. Three: I want a signed confession admitting that you employed Lavoisier to eradicate

Landen."

I gazed at him steadily, hoping my audacity would strike a positive nerve.

"One: Agreed. Two: You get the book back *afterwards*. You used it to vanish in Osaka, and I'm not having that again. Three: I can't do."

"Why not?" I asked. "Bring Landen back and the confession is irrelevant, because it never happened--but I can use it if you *ever* try anything like this again."

"Perhaps," put in Lavoisier, "you would accept this as a token of my intent."

He handed me a brown hard-back envelope. I opened it and pulled out a picture of Landen and me at our wedding.

"I have nothing to gain from your husband's eradication and everything to lose, Miss Next. Your father, well, I'll get to him eventually. But you have the word of a commander in the ChronoGuard--if that's good enough."

I looked at Lavoisier, then at Schitt-Hawse, then at the photo. It was the one that used to sit on the mantelpiece at my mother's house.

"Where did you get this?"

"In another time, another place," replied Lavoisier. "And at considerable personal risk to myself, I assure you. Landen is nothing to us, Miss Next--I am only here to help Goliath. Once done I can leave them to their nefarious activities--and not before time."

Schitt-Hawse shuffled slightly and glared at Lavoisier. It was clear they mistrusted each other deeply; it could only work to my advantage.

"Then let's do it," I said finally. "But I need a sheet of paper."

"Why?" asked Schitt-Hawse.

"Because I have to write a detailed description of this charming dungeon to be able to get *back*, that's why."

Schitt-Hawse nodded to Chalk, who gave me a pen and paper, and I sat down and wrote the most detailed description that I could. The travelbook said that five hundred words was adequate for a solo jump, a thousand words if you were to bring anyone with you, so I wrote fifteen hundred just in case. Schitt-Hawse looked over my shoulder as I wrote, checking I wasn't writing another destination.

"I'll take that back, Next," said Schitt-Hawse, retrieving the pen as soon as I had finished. "Not that I don't trust you or anything."

I took a deep breath, opened the copy of *The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* and read the first verse to myself:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,  
O'er a plan to venge myself upon that cursed Thursday Next--  
This Eyre affair, so surprising, gives my soul such loath despising,

Here I plot my temper rising, rising from my jail of text.  
"Get me out!" I said, advising, "Pluck me from this jail of text--  
or I swear I'll wring your neck!"

He was still pissed off, make no mistake about *that*. I read on:

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in my bleak September  
when that loathsome SpecOps member tricked me through "The  
Raven's" door.

Eagerly I wished the morrow would release me from this sorrow,  
then a weapon I will borrow, Sorrow *her* turn to explore--  
I declare that obnoxious maiden who is little but a whore--  
darkness hers--for evermore!

"Still the same old Jack Schitt," I murmured.

"I won't let him lay a finger on you, Miss Next," assured Schitt-Hawse. "He'll be arrested before you can say ketchup."

So, gathering my thoughts, I offered my apologies to Miss Havisham for being an impetuous student, cleared my mind and throat and then read the words out loud, large as life and clear as a bell.

There was a distant rumble of thunder and the flutter of wings close to my face. An inky blackness fell and a wind sprang up and whistled about me, tugging at my clothes and flicking my hair into my eyes. A flash of lightning briefly illuminated the sky about me, and I realized with a start that I was high above the ground, hemmed in by clouds filled with the ugly passion of a tempest in full spate. The rain struck my face with a sudden ferocity, and I saw in the feeble moonlight that I was being swept along close to a large storm cloud, illuminated from within by bolts of lightning. Just when I thought that perhaps I had made a *very* big mistake by attempting this feat without proper instruction, I noticed a small dot of yellow light through the swirling rain. I watched as the dot grew bigger until it wasn't a dot but an oblong, and presently this oblong became a window, with frames, and glass, and curtains beyond. I flew closer and faster, and just when I thought I must collide with the rain-splashed glass I was *inside*, wet to the skin and quite breathless.

The mantel clock struck midnight in a slow and steady rhythm as I gathered my thoughts and looked around. The furniture was of highly polished dark oak, the drapes a gloomy shade of purple, and the wall coverings, where not obscured by bookshelves or morbid mezzotints, were a dismal brown color. For light there was a solitary oil lamp that

flickered and smoked from a poorly trimmed wick. The room was in a mess; the bust of Pallas lay shattered on the floor, and the books that had once graced the shelves were now scattered about the room with their spines broken and pages torn. Worse still, some books had been used to rekindle the fire; a choked profusion of blackened paper had fallen from the grate and now covered the hearth. But to all of this I paid only the merest attention. Before me was the poor narrator of "The Raven" himself, a young man in his mid-twenties seated in a large armchair, bound and gagged. He looked at me imploringly and mumbled something behind the gag as he struggled with his bonds. As I removed the gag the young man burst forth in speech as though his life depended upon it:

*"'Tis some visitor,"* he said urgently and rapidly, *"tapping at my chamber door--only this and nothing more!"*

And so saying, he disappeared from view into the room next door.

"Damn you, Sebastian!" said a chillingly familiar voice from the adjoining room. "I would pin you to your chair if this poetical coffin had seen so fit as to furnish me with hammer and nails--!"

But the speaker stopped abruptly as he entered the room and saw me. Jack Schitt was in a wretched condition. His previously neat crew cut had been replaced by straggly hair and his thin features were now covered with a scruffy beard; his eyes were wide and haunted and hung with dark circles from lack of sleep. His sharp suit was rumpled and torn, his diamond tiepin lacking in luster. His arrogant and confident manner had given way to a lonely desperation, and as his eyes met mine I saw tears spring up and his lips tremble. It was, to a committed Schitt-hater like myself, a joyous spectacle.

"Thursday!" he croaked in a strangled cry. "Take me back! Don't let me stay one more second in this vile place! The endless clock striking midnight, the tap-tap-tapping, the raven-- oh my good God, the *raven!*"

He fell to his knees and sobbed as the young man bounded happily back into the room and started to tidy up as he muttered:

*"'Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door--!"*

"I'd be more than happy to leave you here, Mr. Schitt, but I've cut a deal. C'mon, we're going home."

I grasped the Goliath agent by the lapel and started to read the description of the vault back at Goliath R&D. I felt a tug on my body and another rush of wind, the tapping increased, and I just had time to hear the student say, *"Sir or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore . . ."* when we found ourselves back in the Goliath lab at Aldermaston. I was pleased with this, as I hadn't thought it would be that easy, but all my feelings of self-satisfaction vanished when, instead of being arrested, Jack was hugged warmly by his half brother.

"Jack--!" said Schitt-Hawse happily. "Welcome back!"



"Thank you, Brik--how's Mum?"

"She had to have her hip done."

"Again--?"

"Wait a minute!" I interrupted. "How about *your* part of the deal?"

The two Schitts stopped chattering for a moment.

"All in good time, Miss Next," murmured Schitt-Hawse with an unpleasant grin. "We need you to do one or two *other* small jobs before your husband is reactualized."

"The hell I will," I said angrily, taking a step forward as Chalk put a massive hand on my shoulder. "What happened to the riveted-iron Goliath Guarantee?"

"Goliath don't do promises," replied Schitt-Hawse slowly as Jack stood blinking stupidly. "The profit margin is too low. I want you to remain our guest for a while--a woman with your talents is far too useful to lose. You may actually quite like it here."

"Lavoisier!" I yelled, turning to the Frenchman. "*You* promised! The word of a commander in the ChronoGuard--!"

He stared at me coldly.

"After what you did to me," he said tersely, "this is the most glorious revenge possible. I hope you rot in hell."

"What did I ever do to you?"

"Oh, nothing *yet*," he replied, readying himself to leave, "but you *will*."

I stared at him coldly. I didn't know what I was going to do to him, but I hoped it was painful.

"Yes," I replied in a quieter voice, "you can count on it."

He walked from the room without looking back.

"Thank you, monsieur!" shouted Schitt-Hawse after him. "The wedding picture was a touch of genius!"

I leaped forward to grab Schitt-Hawse but was pinned down by Chalk and Cheese. I struggled long, hard--and hopelessly. My shoulders sagged and I stared at the ground. Landen had been right. I should have walked away.

"I want to wring her ghost upon the floor," said Jack Schitt, staring in my direction, "to still this beating of my heart. Mr. Cheese, your weapon."

"No, Jack," said Schitt-Hawse. "Miss Next and her unique attributes could open up a large and *highly* profitable market to exploit."

Schitt rounded on his half brother.

"Do you have any idea of the fantastic terrors I've just been through? Tapping--I mean *trapping*--me in 'The Raven' is something Next is *not* going to live to regret. No, Brik, the bookslut *will* surcease my sorrow--!"

Schitt-Hawse held Jack by the shoulders and shook him.

"Snap out of that 'Raven' talk, Jack. You're home now. Listen: The bookslut is potentially worth *billions*."

Schitt stopped and gathered his thoughts.

"Of course," he murmured finally. "A vast untapped resource of consumers. How much useless rubbish do you think we can offload on those ignorant masses in nineteenth-century literature?"

"Indeed," replied Schitt-Hawse, "and our unprocessed waste--*finally* an effective disposal location. *Untold* riches await the corporation. And listen--if it doesn't work out, *then* you can kill her."

"When do we start?" asked Schitt, who seemed to be growing stronger by the second in the life-giving warmth of corporate avarice.

"It depends," said Schitt-Hawse, looking at me, "on Miss Next."

"I'd sooner die," I told them. I meant it, too.

"Oh!" said Schitt-Hawse. "Hadn't you heard? As far as the outside world is concerned you're dead already! Did you think you could see all that was going on here and live to tell the tale?"

I tried to think of some sort of way to escape, but there was nothing to hand--no weapon, no book, nothing.

"I really haven't decided," continued Schitt-Hawse in a patronizing tone, "whether you fell down a lift shaft or blundered into some machinery. Do you have any preferences?"

And he laughed a short and very cruel laugh. I said nothing. There didn't seem to be anything I *could* say.

"I'm afraid, my girl," said Schitt-Hawse as they started to file out the vault door, taking my travelbook with them, "that you are a guest of the corporation for the rest of your natural life. But it won't all be bad. We *will* be willing to reactualize your husband. You won't actually meet him again, of course, but he will be alive--so long as you cooperate, and you will, you know."

I glared at the two Schitts.

"I will never help you, as long as I have breath in my lungs."

Schitt-Hawse's eyelid twitched.

"Oh, you'll help us, Next--if not for Landen, then for your child. Yes, we know about that. We'll leave you for now. And you needn't bother looking for any books in here to pull your vanishing trick--we made *quite* sure there were none!"

He smiled again and stepped out of the vault. The door slammed shut with a reverberating boom that shook me to the core. I sat down on one of the chairs, put my head in my hands and cried tears of frustration, anger--and loss.

## 29.

### Rescued

Miss Havisham's extraction of Thursday from the Goliath vault is the stuff that legends are built on. The thing was, not only had no one ever done it before, no one had even *thought* of doing it before. It put them both on the map and earned Havisham her eighth cover on the Jurisfiction trade paper, *Movable Type*, and Thursday her first. It cemented the bond between them. In the annals of Jurisfiction there were notable partnerships such as Beowulf & Sneed, Falstaff & Tiggywinkle, Voltaire & Flark. That night Havisham & Next emerged as one of the greatest pairings Jurisfiction would ever see. . . .

UNITARY AUTHORITY OF WARRINGTON CAT,  
*Jurisfiction Journals*

THE MOST NOTICEABLE THING about being locked in a vault twelve floors below ground at the Goliath R&D lab was not the isolation, but the *silence*. There was no hum of air-conditioning, no odd snatch of conversation heard through the door, nothing. I thought about Landen, about Miss Havisham, Joffy, Miles and then the baby. What, I wondered, did Schitt-Hawse have in store for him? I got up and paced around the vault, which was lit by harsh striplights. There was a large mirror on the wall that I had to assume was some kind of watching gallery. There was a toilet and shower in a room behind, and a bedroll and a few toiletries in a locker that someone had left out for me.

I spent twenty minutes searching the few nooks and crannies of the room, hoping to find a discarded trashy novel or something that might effect me an escape. There was nothing-- not so much as a pencil shaving, let alone a pencil. I sat on the only chair, closed my eyes and tried to visualize the library and remember the description in my travelbook, and I even recited aloud the opening passage to *A Tale of Two Cities*, something I had learned at school many years ago. My bookjumping skills were nonexistent without a text to read from, but there was nothing to lose, so I tried every quote, passage and poem I had ever committed to memory from Ovid to de la Mare. When I ran out of those I switched to limericks--and ended up telling Bowden's jokes out loud. Nothing. Not so much as a flicker.

I unrolled the bedroll, lay on the floor and closed my eyes, hoping to remember Landen again and discuss the problem with him. It wasn't to be. At that moment the ring that Miss Havisham had given me grew almost unbearably hot, there was a sort of *fworpish* noise, and a figure was standing next to me.

It was Miss Havisham, and she didn't look terribly pleased. Before I

could tell her how relieved I was to see her she pointed a finger at me and said: "You, young lady, are in a *lot* of trouble!"

"Tell me about it."

This wasn't the sort of careless remark she liked to hear from me, and she certainly expected me to jump to my feet when she arrived, so she rapped me painfully on the knee with her stick.

"Ow!" I said, getting the message and rising. "Where did you spring from?"

"Havishams come and go as they please," she replied imperiously. "Why on earth didn't you tell me?"

"I-I didn't think you'd approve of me leaping into a book on my own--especially not Poe," I muttered sheepishly, expecting a tirade of abuse--Vesuvius, in fact. But it didn't happen. Miss Havisham's ire was from *quite* a different direction.

"I couldn't care less about *that*," remarked Miss Havisham haughtily. "What you do in your own time to cheap reprints is no concern of mine!"

"Oh," I said, contemplating her stern features and trying to figure out what I *had* done wrong.

"You should have said *something*!" she said, taking another pace towards me.

"About the baby?" I stammered.

"No, idiot--about *Cardenio*!"

"*Cardenio*?"

There was a faint clank from the door as someone fiddled with the lock. Havisham's arrival, it seemed, had been observed.

"It'll be Chalk and Cheese," I told her. "You'd better jump out of here."

"Absolutely not!" replied Havisham. "We go together. You might be a complete and utter imbecile, but you *are* my responsibility. Trouble is, fourteen feet of concrete is slightly daunting--I'm going to have to *read* us out. Quick, pass me your travelbook!"

"They took it from me."

The door opened and Schitt-Hawse entered; he was grinning fit to burst.

"Well, well," he said, "lock up a bookjumper and another soon joins her!"

He took one look at Havisham's old wedding dress and put two and two together.

"Goodness! Is that . . . Miss Havisham?"

As if in answer, Havisham whipped out her small pistol and fired it in his direction. Schitt-Hawse gave a yelp and leaped back out the door, which clanged shut.

"We need a book," said Miss Havisham grimly. "Anything will do--

even a pamphlet."

"There's nothing in here, Miss Havisham."

She looked around.

"Are you sure? There must be *something*!"

"I've looked--there's nothing!"

Miss Havisham raised an eyebrow and looked me up and down.

"Take off your trousers, girl--and don't say 'what?' in that impudent manner. Do as you're told."

So I did, and Havisham turned the garment over in her fingers as she searched for something.

"There!" she cried triumphantly as the door opened and a hissing gas canister was lobbed in. I followed her gaze but she had found only--*the washing label*. I must have looked incredulous, for she said in an offended manner: "It's enough for me!" and then repeated out loud: "*Wash inside out, wash and dry separately, wash inside out, wash and dry separately . . .*"

We surfed in on the pungent smell of washing detergent and overheated iron. The landscape was dazzling white and was without depth; my feet were firmly planted on ground, yet I could see nothing but white surrounding my shoes when I looked down, the same as the view above me and to either side. Miss Havisham, whose dirty dress seemed even more shabby than usual in the white surroundings, was looking around the lone inhabitants of this strange and empty world: five bold icons the size of garden sheds that stood neatly in a row like standing stones. There was a crude tub with the number 60 on it, an iron shape, a tumble-dryer shape and a couple of others that I wasn't too sure about. I touched the first icon, which felt warm to the touch and very comforting; they all seemed to be made of compressed cotton.

"What were you saying about *Cardenio*?" I asked, still wondering why she was so angry.

"Yes, yes, *Cardenio*," she replied crossly, examining the large washing icons with interest. "Just how likely was it for a pristine copy of a missing play to just pop up out of the blue like that?"

"You mean," I said, the penny finally dropping, "it's a Great Library copy?"

"Of *course* it's a library copy. That fog-headed pantaloon Snell only just reported it, and we need your help to get it back--What are these big shape things?"

"Iconographic *representations* of washing instructions," I told her as I put my trousers back on.

"Hmm," responded Miss Havisham. "This could be tricky. We're inside a washing label, but there are none of those in the library--we

need to jump into a book which is. I can do it without text, but I need a target book to head for. Is there a book written about washing labels?"

"Probably," I replied, "but I've no idea what it might be called." I had an idea. "Does it have to be a book about washing labels?"

Havisham raised an eyebrow, so I carried on.

"Washing machine instructions *always* carry these icons, explaining what they mean."

"Hmm," said Miss Havisham thoughtfully. "Do *you* have a washing machine?"

Fortunately, I did--and more fortunately still, it was one of the things that had survived the sideslip. I nodded excitedly.

"Good. Now, more important, do you know the make and model?"

"Hoover Electron 1000--no! 800 Deluxe--I think."

"Think? You *think*? You'd better be sure, girl, or you and I will be nothing more than carved names on the Boojumorial! Now. Are you *sure*?"

"Yes," I said confidently. "Hoover Electron 800 Deluxe."

She nodded, placed her hands on the tub icon and concentrated hard, teeth clenched and her face red with the effort. I took hold of her arm, and after a moment or two in which I could feel Miss Havisham shake with exertion, we had jumped out of the washing label and into the Hoover instructions.

*"Don't allow the drain hose to kink as this could stop the machine from emptying,"* said a small man in a blue Hoover boiler suit standing next to a brand-new washing machine. We were standing in a sparkling clean washroom that was barely ten feet square. It had neither windows nor door--just a belfast sink, tiled floor, hot and cold inlet taps and a single plug on the wall. For furniture a bed was pushed against the corner, and next to it was a chair, table and cupboard.

*"Doremember that to start a program you must pull out the program control knob. Sorry,"* he said, "I'm being read at the moment. I'll be with you in a sec. *If you have selected white nylon, minimum iron, delicate or . . .*"

"Thursday--!" said Miss Havisham, who suddenly seemed weak at the knees and whose face had turned the same color as her wedding dress. "That took quite some--"

I just managed to catch her as she collapsed; I gently laid her down on the small truckle bed.

"Miss Havisham? Are you okay?"

She patted my arm encouragingly, smiled and closed her eyes. I could see she was pleased with herself--even if the jump had worn her out.

I pulled the single blanket over her, sat on the edge of the low bed, pulled my hair tie out and rubbed my scalp. My trust in Havisham was implicit, but it was still a bit unnerving to be stuck in Hoover instructions.

". . . until the drum starts to rotate. Your machine will empty and spin to complete the program. . . . Hello!" said the man in the boiler suit. "The name's Cullards--I don't often get visitors!"

"Thursday Next," I told him, shaking his hand. "This is Miss Havisham of Jurisfiction."

"Goodness!" said Mr. Cullards, scratching his shiny bald head and smiling impishly. "Jurisfiction, eh? You *are* off the beaten track. The only visitor I've had was--excuse me-- *Control setting D: Whites economy, lightly soiled cotton or linen articles which are color-fast to boiling*--was the time we had a new supplement regarding woollens--but that would have been six or seven months ago. Where *does* the time go?"

He seemed a cheerful enough chap. He thought for a moment and then said: "Would you like a cup of tea?"

I thanked him and he put the kettle on.

"So what's the news?" asked Mr. Cullards, rinsing out his one and only cup. "Any idea when the new washing machines are due out?"

"I'm sorry," I said, "I have no idea--"

"I'm about ready to move on to something a bit more modern. I started on vacuum cleaner instructions but was promoted to Hoovermatic T5004, then transferred to the Electron 800 after twin-tub obsolescence. They asked me to take care of the 1100 Deluxe, but I told them I'd sooner wait until the Logic 1300 came out."

I looked around at the small room.

"Don't you ever get bored?"

"Not at all!" said Cullards, pouring the hot water into the teapot. "Once I've put in my ten years I'm eligible to apply for work in *all* domestic appliance instructions: food mixers, liquidizers, microwaves--who knows, if I work *really* hard I could make it into television or wireless. *That's* the future for an ambitious manual worker. Milk and sugar?"

"Please."

He leaned closer.

"Management have this idea that only young 'uns should do Sound & Vision instructions, but they're wrong. Most of the kids in VCR manuals barely do six months in Walkmans before they're transferred. It's little wonder no one can understand them."

"I never thought of that before," I confessed.

We chatted for the next half hour. He told me he had begun French and German classes so he could apply for work in multilingual

instructions, then confided in me his fondest feelings for Tabitha Doehooke, who worked for Kenwood Mixers. We were just talking about the sociological implications of labor-saving devices within the kitchen and how they related to the women's movement when Miss Havisham stirred.

"Compeyson--!" she muttered without waking. "You lying, stealing, thieving, hound of a . . ."

"Miss Havisham?" I asked.

She stopped mumbling and opened her eyes.

"Next, my girl," she gasped. "I need--"

"Yes?" I asked, leaning closer.

"--a cup of tea."

"Can do!" said Mr. Cullards cheerfully, pouring out a fresh cup. Miss Havisham sat up, drank three cups of tea and also ate the biscuit that Cullards was reserving for his birthday next May. I introduced the Hoover instructionalist, and Miss Havisham nodded politely before announcing we would have to be off.

We said our goodbyes and Mr. Cullards made me promise I would clean out the powder dispenser on my washer; in an unguarded moment I had let slip I had yet to do so, despite the washer's being nearly three years old.

The short trip to the nonfiction section of the Great Library was an easy jump for Miss Havisham, and from there we *fworped* back into her dingy ballroom in *Great Expectations*, where the Cheshire Cat and Harris Tweed were waiting for us, talking to Estella. The Cat seemed quite relieved to see us both, but Harris simply scowled.

"Estella!" said Miss Havisham abruptly. "*Please* don't talk to Mr. Tweed."

"Yes, Miss Havisham," replied Estella meekly.

Havisham replaced her trainers with the less comfortable wedding shoes.

"I have Pip waiting outside," said Estella slightly nervously. "If you will excuse me mentioning it--ma'am is a paragraph *late*."

"Dickens can just flannel for a bit longer," replied Havisham. "I must finish with Miss Next."

She turned to me with a grim look; I thought I'd better say something to soothe her--I hadn't yet seen Havisham lose her temper and I was in no hurry to do so.

"Thank you for my rescue, ma'am," I said quickly. "I'm very grateful to you."

"Humph!" replied Miss Havisham. "Don't expect salvation from me every time you get yourself into a jam, my girl. Now, what's all this about a *baby*?"



The Cheshire Cat, sensing trouble, vanished abruptly on the pretext of some "cataloguing," and even Tweed mumbled something about checking *Lorna Doone* for grammassites and went too.

"Well?" asked Havisham again, peering at me quite intensely.

I didn't feel quite as frightened of her as I once did, so I thought I should come clean and tell her everything. I told her all about Landen's eradication, the offer from Goliath, Jack Schitt in "The Raven" and even Mycroft's Prose Portal. Just for good measure I finished up by telling her how much I was in love with Landen and how I'd do *anything* to get him back.

"For love? Pah!" she answered, dismissing Estella with a wave of her hand in case the young woman got any odd ideas. "And what, in your tragically limited experience, is *that*?"

She didn't seem to be losing her temper, so, emboldened, I continued: "I think you know, ma'am. You were in love once, I believe?"

"Stuff and nonsense, girl!"

"Isn't the pain you feel *now* the equal to the love you felt *then*?"

"You're coming perilously close to contravening my Rule Two!"

"I'll tell you what love is," I told her. "It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter!"

"That was quite good," said Havisham, looking at me curiously. "Could I use that? Dickens won't mind."

"Of course."

"I think," said Miss Havisham after a few moments of deliberation, "that I shall categorize your complex marital question under *widowed*, which sits with me well enough. Upon reflection--and quite possibly against my better judgment-- you may stay as my apprentice. That's all. You are needed to help retrieve *Cardenio*. Go!"

So I left Miss Havisham in her darkened chamber with all the trappings of her wedding that never was. In the few days I had known her I had learned to like her a great deal, and hoped someday I might repay her kindness and match her fortitude.

## 30.

### *Cardenio Rebound*

**PageRunner:** Any character who is out of his or her book and moves through the backstory (or more rarely the plot) of another book. PageRunners may be lost, vacationing, part of the Character Exchange Program or criminals, intent on mischief. (See: Bowdlerizers)

**Texters:** Slang term given to a relatively harmless PageRunner (q.v.) (usually juvenile) who surfs from book to book for adventure and rarely appears in the frontstory but does, on occasion, cause small changes to text and/or plot lines.

UNITARY AUTHORITY OF WARRINGTON CAT,  
*The Jurisfiction Guide to BookJumping* (glossary)

**H**ARRIS TWEED and the Cheshire Cat took me back to the library. We sat on a bench in front of the Boojumorial and Harris stared at me while the Cat--who was nothing if not courteous--went to get me a pasty from the snack bar just next to Mr. Wemmick's storeroom.

"Where did she find you?" snapped Harris. I was getting used to his aggressive mannerisms by now. If he thought as little of me as he made out, then I wouldn't be here at all.

The Cat popped his head up between us and said: "Hot or cold pasty?"

"Hot, please."

"Okay then," he said, and vanished again.

I explained Havisham's leap from the Goliath vault to the washing label; Tweed was clearly impressed. He had been apprenticed to Commander Bradshaw many years previously, and Bradshaw's accuracy in bookjumping was as poor as Havisham's was good--hence the commander's interest in maps.

"A washing label. Now that *is* impressive," mused Harris. "Not many PROs would even attempt to jump blind into less than a hundred words. Havisham took quite a risk with you, Miss Next. Cat, what do you think?"

"I think," said the Cat, handing me a steaming hot pasty, "that you've forgotten the Moggilicious cat food you promised, hmm?"

"Sorry," I replied. "Next time."

"Okay," said the Cat.

"Right," said Harris. "To business. Tell me, who are the chief players in *Cardenio's* discovery?"

"Well," I began, "there's Lord Volescamper, an hereditary peer. He *said* he found it in his library. Amiable chap--bit of a duffer. Then there's Yorrick Kaine, a Whig politician who hopes to use the free

distribution of the play to sway the Shakespeare vote in his favor at tomorrow's election."

"I'll see if I can find which book they're from--if at all," said the Cat, and vanished.

"Is that really likely?" I asked. "Volescamper has been around since before the war, and Kaine has been on the political scene for at least five years."

"It means nothing, Miss Next," replied Harris impatiently. "Mellors had a wife and family in Slough for two decades and Heathcliff worked in Hollywood for three years under the name of Buck Stallion--no one suspected a thing in either case."

"But *Cardenio*," I asked, "it is the library's copy, yes?"

"Without a doubt. Despite elaborate security arrangements, someone managed to swipe it from under the Cat's whiskers-- he's very upset about it."

"Did you say *fig*, or *whig*?" inquired the Cat, who had reappeared.

"I said *Whig*," I replied. "And I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy."

"All right," said the Cat; and this time he vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of his tail, and ending with his grin.

"He doesn't *seem* terribly upset," I observed.

"Looks can be deceptive--in the Cat's case, trebly so. We heard about *Cardenio* only yesterday. It nearly gave the Bellman a fit. He was all for putting together one of his madcap and typically Boojum-ridden expeditions. As soon as I found out that Kaine was going to make *Cardenio* public property, I knew we had to act and act fast."

"But listen," I said, my head spinning slightly with all this new intelligence, "why is it so important that *Cardenio* remain lost? It's a *brilliant* play."

"I wouldn't expect you to understand," replied Tweed crossly, "but believe me, there are extremely good reasons why *Cardenio* must stay lost. Listen, it's no accident that only seven out of Aeschylus' hundred or so plays survive, or that *Paradise Lost Once More* will never be known."

"Why?"

"Don't ask," replied Tweed shortly. "And besides, if the rest of the bookworld figures out there is something to gain by swiping library books, then we could be in one hell of a state."

"Okay," I returned, quite used to secretive policing divisions at SpecOps, "so why am I here?"

"Clearly, this is no place for an apprentice, but you know the layout of Vole Towers as well as having met the key suspects. Do you know where *Cardenio* is kept?"

"In a combination-and-key safe within the library itself."

"Good. But first we need to get in. Can you remember any of the other books in the library?"

I thought for a moment.

"There was a rare first edition of *Decline and Fall* by Evelyn Waugh."

"Come on then," he said abruptly. "No time for dawdling. We're off."

We took the elevator to Floor W of the library, found the copy we were looking for and were soon within the book, tiptoeing past a noisy party in the quad at Scone College. Tweed concentrated on the outward jump, and a few moments later we were standing inside the locked library at Vole Towers.

"Cat," said Harris, looking around at the untidy library, "you there?"<sup>1</sup>

"A simple 'Yes' will do. Send the safecrackers in by way of a first of *Decline and Fall*. If they come across Captain Grimes, they are not to lend him money *on any account*. Anything on Volescamper or Kaine?"<sup>2</sup>

"Blast!" exclaimed Tweed. "Too much to hope they'd be stupid enough to use their own names."

Two men suddenly appeared next to us, and Harris pointed them in the direction of the safe. One wore a fine evening dress; the other was attired in a more sober woolen suit and carried a holdall that once opened revealed an array of beautifully crafted safecracking tools. After running an expert eye over the safe for a few moments the elder of the two removed his jacket, took the stethoscope proffered to him by his companion and listened to the safe as he gently turned the combination wheel.

"Is that Raffles?" I whispered. "The gentleman thief?"

Harris nodded, checking his watch.

"With his assistant, Bunny. If anyone can, they can."

"So who do you think stole *Cardenio*?"

"A good one for tricky questions, aren't you, Next? We have a suspect list as long as your arm--there are several million possible contenders in the bookworld, and any one of them could have gone rogue, jumped out of their book, swiped *Cardenio* and legged it over here."

"So how do you tell whether someone is an impostor or not?"

Harris looked at me.

"With great difficulty. Do you think I belong here, in your world?"

I looked at the short man with the elegant tweed herringbone suit and touched him gently on the chest with a finger. He was as real to me as anyone I had ever met, either within books or without. He breathed, smiled, scowled--how was I meant to tell?

"I don't know. Are you from a 1920s detective novel?"

"Wrong," replied Harris. "I'm as real as you are. I work three days a week for Skyrail as a signals operator. But how could I *prove* that? I

could just as easily be a minor character in an obscure novel somewhere. The only sure way to tell would be to place me under observation for two months--that's about the limit any bookperson can stay outside their book. But enough of this. Our first priority is to get the manuscript back. After that, we can start figuring out who is who."

"There's no quicker way?"

"Only one other that I know of. No bookperson is going to take a bullet; if you try and shoot one, chances are they'll jump."

"It sounds a bit like testing for witches. If they sink and drown, they're innocent--"

"It's not ideal," said Harris gruffly. "I'm the first to admit that."

Within half an hour Raffles had worked out the combination and now turned his attention to the secondary locking mechanism. He was slowly drilling a hole above the combination knob, and the quiet squeaking of the drill bit seemed inordinately loud to our heightened nerves. We were staring at him and silently urging him to go faster when a noise from the library's heavy door made us turn. Harris and I leaped to either side as the unlocking wheel spun to draw the steel tabs from the slots in the iron frame, and the door swung slowly open. Raffles and Bunny, well used to being disturbed, silently gathered up their tools and hid beneath a table.

"The manuscript will be released to the publishers first thing tomorrow morning," said Kaine as he and Volescamper strolled in. Tweed pointed his automatic at them, and they jumped visibly. I pushed the door shut behind them and spun the locking mechanism.

"What is the meaning of this?" said Volescamper in an outraged voice. "Miss Next? Is that you?"

"As large as life, Volescamper. I'm sorry, I have to search you."

The two of them meekly acquiesced to a searching; they were unarmed, but Yorrick Kaine had turned a deep shade of crimson during the process.

"Thieves!" he spat. "How dare you!"

"No," replied Harris, beckoning them further into the room and signaling for Raffles to continue with his work, "we have only come to retrieve *Cardenio*--something that does not belong to either of you."

"Now look here, I don't know what you're talking about," began Volescamper, who was visibly outraged. "This house is surrounded by SO-14 agents--there is no escape. And as for you, Miss Next, look here, I am deeply disappointed by your perfidy!"

"What do you reckon?" I said to Harris. "His indignation *seems* real."

"It does--but he has less to gain from this than Kaine."

"You're right--my money's on Kaine."

"What are you *talking* about?!" demanded Kaine angrily. "The manuscript belongs to literature--how do you think you can sell

something like this on the open market? You may think you can get away with it, but I will die before I allow you to remove the literary heritage that belongs to all of us!"

"Well, I don't know," I added. "Kaine is pretty convincing too."

"Remember, he's a politician."

"Of course," I returned, snapping my fingers. "I'd forgotten. What if it's neither?"

I didn't have time to answer as there was a crash from somewhere near the front of the house and the sound of an explosion. A low guttural moan reached our ears, followed by the terrified scream of a man in mortal terror. A shiver ran up my spine and I could see that everyone else in the room had felt it too. Even the implacable Raffles paused for a moment before returning to work with just a little bit more urgency.

"Cat!" exclaimed Harris. "What's going on?"<sup>3</sup>

"The Questing Beast?" exclaimed Tweed. "The *Glatisant*? Summon King Pellinore *immediately*."<sup>4</sup>

"The Questing Beast?" I asked. "Is that bad?"

"Bad?" replied Harris. "It's the *worst*. Think loathsome, think repulsive, think evil, think of escape. The Questing Beast was born in the oral tradition *before* books; an amalgam of every dark and fetid horror that ever sprang from the most depraved recesses of the human imagination--all rolled into one foul-smelling package. It has many names, but its goal is always the same: death and destruction. As soon as it comes through the door anyone still in here will be stone cold dead."

"*Through* the vault door?"

"There is no barrier yet created that can withstand the Questing Beast, except a Pellinore--they have hunted it for years!"

Harris turned to Kaine and Volescamper.

"But there's one thing it does tell us. One of you *is* fictional. One of you has invoked the Questing Beast. I want to know who it is!"

Kaine and Volescamper looked at Tweed, then at me, at each other and finally at the steel door as we heard another low moan. The light machine gun at the front door fell silent and a splintering of wood met our ears as the Questing Beast forced its way through the main entrance and moved its odious form closer to the library.

"Cat!" yelled Tweed again. "Where's that King Pellinore I asked for?"<sup>5</sup>

"Keep trying," muttered Tweed. "We've still got a few minutes. Next--have *you* any ideas?"

For once, I didn't. With loathsome creatures from the id *outside*, a fictional person pretending to be real *inside* and me in the middle wondering quite what I was doing here in the first place, creative

thought wasn't exactly high on my agenda. I mumbled an apology and shook my head.

There was a crunching sound as the Questing Beast made its way down the corridor amidst screams of terror and sporadic rifle fire.

"Raffles?" yelled Tweed. "How long?"

"Two minutes, old chum," replied the safecracker without pausing or looking up. He had finished drilling the hole, made a small cup out of clay and stuck it against the side of the safe and was now pouring in what looked like liquid nitrogen.

The battle outside seemed to increase in ferocity. There were shouts, concussions from grenades, screams and the rattle of automatic weaponry until, after an almighty crash that shook the ceiling lights and toppled books from their shelves, all was quiet.

We looked at one another. Then a gentle tap rang out, like the tip of a spear struck against the other side of the steel door. There was a pause, then another.

"Thank goodness!" said Tweed in relief. "King Pellinore must have arrived and seen it off. Next, open the door."

But I didn't. Suspicious of loathsome beasts from the deepest recesses of the human imagination, I stayed my hand. It was as well that I did. The next blow was harder. The blow following *that* was harder still; the vault door shook.

"Blast!" exclaimed Tweed. "Why is there *never* a Pellinore around when you need one? Raffles, we don't have much time--!"

"Just a few minutes more . . ." replied Raffles quietly, tapping the safe door with a hammer while Bunny pulled on the brass handle.

Tweed looked at me as the library door buckled under another heavy blow; a split opened up in the steel, and the locking wheel sheared off and dropped to the ground. It wasn't a question of *if* the Glatissant got in, it was a question of *when*.

"Okay," said Tweed reluctantly, grabbing my elbow in anticipation of a jump, "that's it. Raffles, Bunny, out of here!"

"Just a few moments longer . . ." replied the safecracker with his usual calm. Raffles was used to fine deadlines and didn't like to give up on a safe, no matter what the possible consequences.

The steel door buckled once more and the rent in the steel grew wider as the Questing Beast charged it with a deafening crash. Books fell off the shelves in a cloud of dust and a foul odor began to fill the air. Then, as the Questing Beast readied itself for another blow, I had the one thing that had eluded me for the past half hour. *An idea*. I pulled Tweed close to me and whispered in his ear.

"No!" he said. "What if--?"

I explained again, he smiled and I began:

"So one of you is fictional," I announced, looking at them both.

"And we have to find out who it is," remarked Tweed, leveling his pistol in their direction.

"Might it be Yorrick Kaine--" I added, staring at Kaine, who glared back at me, wondering what we were up to,

--failed right-wing politician--

--with a cheery enthusiasm for war--

--and putting a lid on civil liberties?"

Tweed and I bantered lines back and forth for as long as we dared, faster and faster, the blows from the beast outside matching the blows from Raffles's hammer within.

"Or perhaps it is Volescamper--"

--lord of the *old* realm, who wants--

--to try and get--

--back into power with the help--

--of his friends at the Whig party?"

"*But* the important thing is, in all this dialogue--"

--that has pitched back and forward between--"

--the two of us, a *fictional* person--"

--might have lost track of which one of us is talking."

"And do you know, in all the excitement, *I kind of forgot myself!*"

There was another crash against the door. A splinter of steel flew off and zipped past my ear. The doors were almost breached; with the next blow the abomination would be upon us.

"So you're going to have to ask yourselves one simple question: *Which one of us is speaking now?*"

"You are!" yelled Volescamper, pointing--correctly--at me. Kaine, revealing his fictional roots by his inability to follow undedicated dialogue, pointed his finger--at *Tweed*.

He corrected himself quickly, but it was too late for the politician, and he knew it. He scowled at the two of us, trembling with rage. His charming manner seemed to desert him as we sprang the trap; suaveness gave way to snarling, smooth politeness to clumsy threats.

"Now listen," growled Kaine, trying to regain control of the situation, "you two are in way over your heads. Try to arrest me and I can make things *very* difficult for you--one footnoterphone call from me and the pair of you will spend the next eternity on grammasite watch inside the *OED*."

But Tweed was made of stern stuff, too.

"I've closed bloopholes in *Dracula* and *Biggles Flies East*," he replied evenly. "I don't frighten easily. Call off the Glatissant and put your hands on your head."

"Leave *Cardenio* here with me--if only until tomorrow," added Kaine, changing tack abruptly and forcing a smile. "In return I can give you *anything* you want. Power, cash--an earldom, Cornwall, character



exchange into Hemingway--you name it, Kaine will provide!"

"You have nothing of any value to bargain with, Mr. Kaine," Tweed told him, his hand tightening on his pistol. "For the last time--"

But Kaine had no intention of being taken, alive or otherwise. He cursed us both to a painful excursion in the twelfth circle of hell and melted from view as Tweed fired. The slug buried itself harmlessly in a complete set of bound *Punch* magazines. At the same time the steel doors burst open. But instead of a pestilential hell-beast conjured from the depths of mankind's most degenerate thoughts, only an icy rush of air entered, bringing with it the lingering smell of death. The Questing Beast had vanished as quickly as its master, back to the oral tradition and any books unfortunate enough to feature it.

"Cat!" yelled Tweed as he reholstered his gun. "We've got a PageRunner. I need a bookhound ASAP!"<sup>6</sup>

Volescamper sat down on a handy chair and looked bewildered.

"You mean," he stammered incredulously, "look here, Kaine was--?"

"--entirely fictional--yes," I replied, laying a hand on his shoulder.

"You mean *Cardenio* didn't belong to my grandfather's library after all?" he asked, his confusion giving way to sadness.

"I'm sorry, Volescamper," I told him. "Kaine stole the manuscript. He used your library as a front."

"And if I were you," added Tweed in a less kindly aside, "I should just go upstairs and pretend you slept all through this. You never saw us, never heard us, you know *nothing* of what happened here."

"Bingo!" cried Raffles as the handle on the safe turned, shattering the frozen lock inside and creaking open. Raffles handed me the manuscript before he and Bunny vanished back to their own book with only the thanks of Jurisfiction to show for the night's efforts--a valuable commodity on their side of the law.

I passed *Cardenio* to Tweed. He rested a reverential hand on the play and smiled a rare smile.

"An undedicated dialogue trap, Next--quick thinking. Who knows, we might make a Jurisfiction agent of you yet."

"Well, thank--"

"Cat!" bellowed Tweed again. "Where's that blasted bookhound?"<sup>7</sup>

A large and sad-looking bloodhound appeared from nowhere, looked at us both lugubriously, made a sort of hopeless doggy-sigh and then started to sniff the books scattered on the floor in a professional manner. Tweed snapped a lead on the dog's collar.

"If I was the sort of person to apologize," he conceded, straining at the leash of the bookhound, who had locked onto the scent of one of Kaine's expletives, "I would. Join me in the hunt for Kaine?"

It was tempting, but I remembered Dad's prediction--and there was Landen to think of.

"I have to save the world tomorrow," I announced, surprising myself by just how matter-of-fact I sounded. Tweed, on the other hand, didn't seem in the least surprised.

"Oh!" he said. "Well, another time, then. On sir, seek, *away!*"

The bookhound gave an excited bark and leaped forward; Tweed hung grimly to the leash and they both disappeared into fine mist and the smell of hot paper.

"I suppose," said Lord Volescamper, interrupting the silence in a glum voice, "that this means I won't be in Kaine's government after all?"

"Politics is overrated," I told him.

"Perhaps you're right," he agreed, getting up. "Well, goodnight, Miss Next. I didn't see anything, didn't hear anything, is that right?"

"Nothing at all."

Volescamper sighed and looked at the shattered remains of the interior of his house. He picked his way to the twisted steel door and turned to face me.

"Always was a heavy sleeper. Look here, pop round for tea and scones one day, why don't you?"

"Thank you, sir. I shall. Goodnight."

Volescamper gave me a desultory wave and was soon out of sight. I smiled to myself at the revelation of Kaine's fictional identity; I reckoned that not being a real person had to present a pretty good obstacle to being prime minister, but I couldn't help wondering just how much power he *did* wield within the world of fiction--and whether I had heard the last of him. After all, the Whig party was still in existence, with or without their leader. Still, Tweed was a professional, and I had other things to deal with.

I looked down the corridor, past the twisted doors. The front of Vole Towers, was virtually destroyed; the ceiling had collapsed and rubble lay strewn around where the Glatissant had fought the very finest of SO-14. I picked my way through the twisted door and down the corridor, where deep gouges had been scraped in the floor and walls by the leaden hide of the beast. The remaining SpecOps-14 operatives had all pulled back to regroup, and I slipped out in the confusion. Nine good men fell to the Questing Beast that night. The officers would all be awarded the SpecOps Star for Conspicuous Bravery in the Face of Other.

As I walked along the gravel drive away from what remained of Vole Towers, I could see a white charger galloping towards me, the warrior

on its back holding a sharpened lance while behind him a dog barked excitedly. I waved King Pellinore to a halt.

"Ah!" he said, raising his visor and peering down at me. "The Next girl! Seen the Questin' Beast, what what?"

"I'm afraid you've missed it," I explained. "Sorry."

"Dem shame," announced Pellinore sadly, parking the lance in his stirrup. "Dem shame indeed, eh? I'll find it, you know. It is the lot of the Pellinores, to go a-mollocking for the beastly beast. Come, sir-away!"

He spurred his steed and galloped off across the parkland of Vole Towers, the horse's hooves throwing great divots of grass high in the air, the large white dog running behind them, barking furiously.

I returned to my apartment after giving an anonymous tip-off to *The Mole*, suggesting that they confirm the ongoing existence of *Cardenio*. The fact that I still had the apartment verified once and for all that Landen hadn't been returned. I had been a fool to think that Goliath would honor their part of the deal. I sat in the dark for a while, but even fools need rest, so I went to sleep *under* the bed as a precaution, which was just as well--at 3 a.m. Goliath turned up, had a good look around and then left. I stayed hidden as a further precaution and was glad of this also, because SpecOps turned up at 4 a.m. and did exactly the same. Confident now of no further interruptions, I crawled out from my hiding place and climbed into bed, sleeping heavily until ten the next morning.

## 31.

### Dream Topping

Ever since calories and "sugar intake" were discovered, the realm of the pudding has suffered intensely. There was a day when one could honestly and innocently enjoy the sheer pleasure of a good sticky toffee pudding; when ice cream was nice cream and bakewell tart really was baked well. Tastes change, though, and the world of the sweet has often been sour, having to go through some dramatic overhaulage in order to keep pace. Whilst a straightforward sausage and a common kedgeree maintain their hold on a nation's culinary choices, the pudding has to stay on its toes to tantalize our tastebuds. From low fat through to no fat, from sugar-free through to taste-free; what the next stage is we can only wait and see. . . .

CILLA BUBB,

*Don't Desert Your Desserts*

I PEERED CAUTIOUSLY from the window as I ate my breakfast and could see a black SpecOps Packard on the street corner, doubtless waiting for me to make an appearance. Across the road from them was another car, this time the unmistakable deep blue of Goliath; Mr. Cheese leaned against the bonnet, smoking. I switched on the telly and caught the news. The break-in at Vole Towers had been heavily censored, but it was reported that an unknown "agency" had gained entrance to the building, killed a number of SO-14 agents and made off with *Cardenio*. Lord Volescamper had been interviewed and maintained that he had been "sound asleep" and knew nothing. Yorrick Kaine was still reported as "missing," and early exit polls from the day's election had shown that Kaine and the Whigs had not to have lived up to expectations. Without *Cardenio*, the powerful Shakespeare lobby had returned their allegiances to the current administration, who had promised to postpone, with the help of the ChronoGuard, the eighteenth-century demolition of Shakespeare's old Stratford home.

I allowed myself a wry smile at Kaine's dramatic fall but felt sorry for the officers who had had to face the Questing Beast. I walked through to the kitchen. Pickwick looked at me and then at her empty supper dish with an accusing air.

"Sorry," I muttered as I poured her some dried fruit.

"How's the egg?"

"Plock-plock," said Pickwick.

"Well," I replied, "suit yourself. I was only asking."

I made another cup of tea and sat down to have a think. Dad had said the world was going to end this evening, but whether that was

really going to happen or not, I had no idea. As for me, I was wanted by SpecOps *and* Goliath; I was going to have to either outwit them or lie very low for a long time. I spent most of the day pacing my apartment, trying to figure out the best course of action. I wrote out my account of what had happened and hid it behind the fridge, just in case. I expected Dad to turn up, but the hours ticked by and everything carried on as normal. The Goliath and SpecOps vehicles were relieved by two others at midday, and as dusk drew on I became more desperate. I couldn't stay trapped inside my own apartment forever. Bowden and Joffy I could trust--and perhaps Miles, too. I elected to sneak out and use a public phonebox to call Bowden and was just about to open the door when someone pressed the intercom buzzer downstairs. I quickly ducked out of my apartment and started to run down the staircase. If I reached the bottom and made my way out through the service entrance I might be able to slip away. Then, disaster. One of the tenants was about to leave at that precise moment and opened the door for whoever it was. I heard a brusque voice.

"Here for Miss Next--SpecOps."

I cursed Mrs. Scroggins as she replied: "Fourth floor, second on the left!"

The fire escape was out the front in full view of SpecOps and Goliath, so I ran all the way back upstairs to my flat, only to find that in my hurry I had locked myself out. There was nowhere to hide except behind a potted rubber plant about seven sizes too small, so I pushed open the letterbox and hissed: "Pickwick!"

She wandered out into the hall from the living room and stared at me, head cocked on one side.

"Good. Now listen. I know that Landen said you were really bright, and if you don't do this I'm going to be looped and you're going to be put in a zoo. Now, I need you to find my keys."

Pickwick stared at me dubiously, took two steps closer and then relaxed and plocked a bit.

"Yes, yes, it's me. All the marshmallows you can eat, Pickers, but I need my keys. My *keys*."

Pickwick obediently stood on one leg.

"Shit," I muttered.

"Ah, Next!" said a voice behind me. I stopped, rested my head against the door and let the letterbox snap shut.

"Hello, Cordelia," I said softly without turning round.

"Well, you *have* been giving us the runaround, haven't you?"

I paused, turned and stood up. But Cordelia wasn't with any other SpecOps types--she was with a couple, the winners of her competition. Perhaps things were not quite as bad as I thought. I put my arm around her shoulder and walked her out of earshot.

"Cordelia--"

"Dilly."

"Dilly--"

"Yes, Thurs?"

"What's the word over at SpecOps?"

"Well, darling," answered Cordelia, "the order for your arrest is still only within SpecOps--Flanker is hoping you'll give yourself up. Goliath are telling anyone who will listen that you stole some highly sensitive industrial secrets."

"It's all bullshit, Cordelia."

"I know *that*, Thursday. But I've a job to do. Are you going to meet my people now?"

I had nothing to lose, so we returned to where the two of them were looking at a brochure for the Gravitube.

"Thursday Next, this is James and Catia Plummer, visitors to Swindon for their honeymoon."

"Congratulations," I said, shaking their hands and adding: "Swindon for a honeymoon, eh? You must live only for pleasure."

Cordelia elbowed me and scowled.

"I'd invite you in for a coffee," I explained, "but I've locked myself out."

James rummaged in his pocket and produced a set of keys.

"Are these yours? I found them on the path outside."

"I don't think that's very likely."

But they *were* my keys--a set I had lost a few days earlier. I unlocked the door.

"Come on in. That's Pickwick. Stay away from the windows; there are a few people I don't want to meet outside."

They shut the door behind them and I walked through to the kitchen.

"I was married once," I said as I looked out of the kitchen window. I needn't have worried; the two cars and their occupants were in the same place. "And I hope to be again. Did you tie the knot in Swindon?"

"No," replied Catia. "We were going to have a blessing in the Church of Our Blessed Lady of the Lobsters, but--"

"But what?"

"We were late and missed the appointment."

"Ah," I replied, pausing to consider just how *wholly unlikely* it was that James had found my keys when other passing residents had missed them.

"Can I ask you a question, Miss Next?" asked James.

"Call me Thursday. Hang on a minute."

I nipped into the living room to fetch the entroposcope and shook it

as I walked back in.

"Well, Thursday," continued James, "I was wondering--"

"Shit!" I exclaimed, looking at the swirling pattern within the rice and lentils. "It's happening again!"

"I think your dodo is hungry," observed Catia, as Pickwick performed her "starving dodo" routine for her on the kitchen floor.

"It's a scam for a marshmallow," I replied absently. "You can give her one if you want. The jar is on top of the fridge."

Catia put down her bag and reached up for the glass jar.

"Sorry, James, you were saying?"

"Here it is. Who do you--"

But I wasn't listening. I was looking out of the kitchen window. Below me, sitting on the wall at the entrance to the apartment block, was a woman in her mid-twenties. She was dressed in slightly garish clothes and was reading a fashion magazine.

"Aornis?" I whispered. "Can you hear me?"

The figure turned to look at me as I said the words, and my scalp prickled. It was *her*, no doubt about it. She smiled, waved and pointed to her watch.

"It's her," I mumbled. "Goddamned sonofabitch--it's her!"

--and that's my question," concluded James.

"I'm sorry, James, I wasn't listening."

I shook the entroposcope, but the pulses were no more patterned than before--whatever the danger was, we weren't quite there yet.

"You had a question, James?"

"Yes," he said, slightly annoyed. "I was wondering--"

"Look out!" I shouted, but it was too late. The glass marshmallow jar had slipped from Catia's grasp and fell heavily on the worktop--right on top of the small evidence bag full of the pink goo from beyond the end of the world. The jar didn't break, but the bag *did*, and Catia, myself, Cordelia and James were splattered in gooey slime. James got the worst of it--a huge gob went right in his face.

"Ugh!"

"Here," I said, handing him a Seven Wonders of Swindon tea towel, "use this."

"What is that gick?" asked Cordelia, dabbing at her clothes with a damp cloth.

"I wish I knew."

But James licked his lips and said: "I'll tell you what this is. It's Dream Topping."

"Dream Topping?" I queried. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Strawberry flavor. Know it anywhere."

I put a finger in the goo and tasted it. No mistake, it *was* Dream Topping. If only forensics had looked at the big picture instead of

staring at molecules, they might have figured it out for themselves. But it got me thinking.

"Dream Topping?" I wondered out loud, looking at my watch. There were eighty-seven minutes of life left on the planet. "How could the world turn to Dream Topping?"

"It's the sort of thing," piped up James, "that Mycroft might know."

"You," I said, pointing a finger at the pudding-covered individual, "are a genius."

What had Mycroft said before he left about his R&D work at ConStuff? Miniaturized machines, *nanomachines* barely bigger than a cell, building food protein out of nothing more than garbage? Banoffee pie from landfills? Perhaps there was going to be an accident. After all, what *stopped* nanomachines from making banoffee pie once they had started? I looked out of the window. Aornis had gone.

"Do you have a car?" I asked.

"Sure," said James.

"You're going to have to take me over to ConStuff. Dilly, I need your clothes."

Cordelia looked suspicious.

"Why?"

"I've got watchers. Three in, three out--they'll think I'm you."

"No way on earth," replied Cordelia indignantly. "Unless you agree to do *all* my interviews and press junkets."

"At my first appearance I'll have my head lopped off by Goliath or SpecOps--or both."

"Perhaps that's so," replied Cordelia slowly, "but I'd be a fool to pass on an opportunity as good as this. All the interviews and appearances I request for *a year*."

"Two months, Cordelia."

"Six."

"Three."

"Okay," she sighed, "three months--but you have to do *TheThursday Next Workout Video* and talk to Harry about the *Eyre Affair* film project."

"Deal."

So Cordelia and I switched clothes. It felt very odd to be wearing her large pink sweater, short black skirt and high heels.

"Don't forget the Peruvian love beads," said Cordelia, "and my gun. Here."

"Excuse me, Miss Flakk," said James in a slightly indignant tone. "You promised I could ask Miss Next a question."

Flakk pointed a finely manicured fingertip at him and narrowed her eyes. "Listen here, buster. You're both on SpecOps business right now--



a bonus I'd say. Any complaints?"

"Er--no, I guess not," stammered James.

I led them outside, past the Goliath and SpecOps agents waiting for me. I made some expansive Cordelia-like moves and they barely gave us a second glance. We were soon in James's hired Studebaker, and I directed him across town as I switched back to my own clothes.

"Thursday?" asked James.

"Yes?" I replied, looking around to see if I could see Aornis and shaking the entroposcope. Entropy seemed to be holding at the "slightly odd" mark.

"Who is the father of Pickwick's egg?"

I get asked some odd questions sometimes. But he was driving me across town, so I thought I would show him some slack.

"I think it was one of the feral dodos down at the park," I explained. "I caught Pickwick doing a sort of coy come-hither dodo thing a month back, with a large male near the bandstand. Pickwick's amour plocked noisily outside the house for a week, but I didn't know anything had actually *happened*. Does that answer your question?"

"I guess."

"Good. Okay, pull up over there. I'll walk the rest of the way."

They dropped me by the side of the road, and I thanked them before running up the street. It was already quite dark and the streetlamps were on. It didn't look like the world was about to end in twenty-six minutes, but then I don't suppose it ever does.

## The End of Life as We Know It

After failing to get Landen back, dealing with Armageddon didn't really hold the same sort of *excitement* for me that it would later. They always say the first time you save the world is the hardest-- personally I have *always* found it tricky, but this time, I don't know. Perhaps Landen's loss numbed my mind and immunized me against panic. Perhaps the distraction actually helped.

THURSDAY NEXT,

*Private Diaries*

CONSOLIDATED USEFUL STUFF was situated in a large complex on the airfield at Stratton. There was a guardhouse, but I had coincidence on my side--as I walked into the security building all three guards had been called away on some errand or other, and I was able to slip through unnoticed. I rubbed my arm, which had inexplicably twinged with pain, and followed the signs toward Mycro Tech Developments. I was just wondering how to get into the locked building when a voice made me jump.

"Hello, Thursday!"

It was Wilbur, Mycroft's boring son.

"No time to explain, Will--I need to get into the nanotechnology lab."

"Why?" asked Wilbur, fumbling with his keys.

"There's going to be an accident."

"Absolutely *impossible!*" he scoffed, throwing the doors open to reveal a mass of spinning red lights and the raucous sounding of a klaxon.

"Heavens!" exclaimed Wilbur. "Do you think it's meant to be doing that?"

"Call someone."

"Right."

He picked up the phone. Predictably enough, it was dead. He tried another but they were *all* dead.

"I'll get help!" he said, tugging at the doorknob, which came off in his hand. "What the--"

"Entropy's decreasing by the second, Will. Are you using Dream Topping in any of your nanomachines?"

He led me to a cabinet where a tiny drop of pink goo was suspended in midair by powerful magnets.

"There she is. The first of her kind. Still experimental, of course. There are a few problems with the discontinuation command string.

Once it starts changing organic matter into Dream Topping, *it won't stop.*"

I looked at my watch and noticed that there were barely twelve minutes left.

"What's keeping it from working at the moment?"

"The magnetic field keeps the nanodevice immobilized, the refrigeration system is set below its activation temperature of minus ten degrees--what was that?"

The lights had flickered.

"Power grid failure."

"No problem, Thursday--there are three backup generators. They can't *all* fail at the same time, that would be too much of a--"

"--coincidence, yes, I know. But they will. And when they do, that coincidence will be the biggest, the best--and the last."

"Thursday, that's not possible!"

"*Anything* is possible right now. We're in the middle of an isolated high-coincidental localized entropic field decreasement."

"We're in a *what*?"

"We're in a pseudoscientific technobabble."

"Ah!" replied Wilbur, having witnessed quite a few at MycroTech Developments. "One of *those*."

"What happens when the final backup fails, Wilbur?"

"The nanodevice will be expelled into the atmosphere," said Wilbur grimly. "It is programmed to make strawberry-flavored pudding mix and will continue to do so as long as it has organic material to work with. You, me, that table over there--then when someone comes to let us out in the morning, the machine will get to work on the outside."

"How quickly?"

"Well," said Wilbur, thinking hard, "the device will make replicas of itself to carry out the work even faster, so the more organic material is swallowed up, the faster the process becomes. The entire planet? I'd give it about a week."

"And nothing can stop it?"

"Nothing I know of," he replied sadly. "The best way to stop this is to not allow it to start--sort of a minimum entry requirement for man-made disasters, really."

"Aornis!" I shouted at the top of my voice. "*Where the hell are you?*"

There was no reply.

"AORNIS!"

And then she answered. But it was from such an unexpected quarter that I cried out in fright. She spoke to me--*from my memory*. It was as though a barrier had been lifted in my mind. The day on the Skyrail platform. The moment I first set eyes on Aornis. I thought it had only

been a glimpse, but it wasn't. We had spoken together for several minutes as I waited for the shuttle. I cast my mind back and read the newly recovered memories as my palms grew sweaty. The answers had been there all along.

"Hello, Thursday," said the young woman on the bench, dabbing her nose with a powder compact.

I walked over to her.

"You know my name?"

"I know a lot more than that. My name is Aornis Hades. You killed my brother."

I tried not to let my surprise show.

"Self-defense, Miss Hades. If I could have taken him alive, I would have."

"No member of the Hades family has been taken alive for over eighty-three generations."

I thought about the twin puncture, the Skyrail ticket, all the chance happenings to get me on the platform.

"Are you manipulating coincidences, Hades?"

"Of course!" she replied as the shuttle hissed into the station. "You're going to get on that shuttle and be shot accidentally by an SO-14 marksman. An ironic end, don't you think? Shot by one of your own?"

"What if I don't get on the Skyrail? What if I take you in right here and now?"

Aornis sniggered at my naivete.

"Dear Acheron was a fine and worthy Hades despite the fact he killed his brother--something Mother was very cut up about--but he was never truly *au fait* with some of the family's more diabolical attributes. You'll get on that train, Thursday-- *because you won't remember anything about this conversation!*"

"Don't be ridiculous!" I laughed, but Aornis returned to her powder compact and I *had* got on the train.

"What is it?" asked Wilbur, who had been staring at me as the memories of Aornis came flooding back.

"Recovered memories," I replied grimly as the lights flickered. The first backup generator had failed. I checked my watch. There were six minutes to go.

"Thursday?" murmured Wilbur, lower lip trembling. "I'm frightened."

"Me too, Will. Quiet a sec."

And I thought back to my next meeting with Aornis. At Uffington, when she posed as Violet De'ath. On this occasion we had been in

company, so she hadn't said anything, but the next time, when I was in Osaka, she had sat next to me on the bench, just after the fortune-teller was struck by lightning.

"Clever trick," she said, arranging her shopping bags so they wouldn't fall over, "using the coincidence in that way. Next time you won't be so lucky--and while we're on the subject, how did you get out of the jam on the Skyrail?"

I really didn't want to answer her questions.

"What are you doing to me?" I demanded instead. "What are you doing to my *head*?"

"A simple recollection erasure, Thursday. I'm a mnemenomorph. My particular edge is that I am instantly forgettable-- you will *never* capture me because you will forget that we ever met. I can erase your memory of me so instantaneously I am rendered invisible. I can walk where I please, steal what I wish--I can even murder in broad daylight."

"Very clever, Hades."

"Please, call me Aornis--I'd like us to be pals."

She pushed her hair behind her ear and looked at her nails for a moment before asking: "I saw a beautiful cashmere sweater just now; it's available in turquoise or emerald. Which do you think would suit me better?"

"I have no idea."

"I'll get them both," she replied after a moment of reflection. "It's on a stolen credit card, after all."

"Enjoy your game, Aornis, it won't be forever. I defeated your brother--I'll do the same to you."

"And how do you propose to do that?" she sneered. "When you can't recollect anything about our meetings at all? My dear, you won't even remember *this* one--until I want you to!"

And she gathered up her bags and walked off.

The lights in the nanotechnology lab flickered again. Wilbur and I looked at one another as the second backup generator failed. He tried the phones again in desperation, but everything was still dead. Death by coincidence. What a way to go. But it was now, with only two minutes to go, that Aornis lifted the last barrier and I clearly remembered the *last* occasion she and I had faced each other. It had occurred not twenty minutes before at the ConStuff reception. It hadn't been empty at all; Aornis had been there, waiting for me--ready to deliver the *coup de grace*.

"Well!" she exclaimed as I walked in. "Figured this one out, did you?"

"Damn you, Hades!" I retorted, reaching for my pistol. She caught my wrist and pulled me into a painful half nelson with surprising speed.

"Listen to me," she whispered in my ear while holding my arm locked tightly behind me. "There's going to be an accident in the nanotechnology lab. Your uncle hoped to feed the world, when in fact he will be the father of its destruction. The irony is so heavy you could cut it with a knife!"

"Wait--!" I said, but she pulled my arm up harder and I yelped.

"I'm talking, Next. *Never* interrupt a Hades when they're talking. You will die for what you have done to our family, but just to show I'm not a total fiend, I will allow you one last heroic gesture, something your pathetic self-righteous character seems to crave. At precisely six minutes before the accident, you will begin to remember all our little chats together."

I struggled, but she held me tight.

"You'll remember this meeting last. So here's my offer. Take your pistol and turn it upon yourself--and I'll spare the planet."

"And if I don't?" I shouted. "You'll die too!"

"No," she laughed, "I know you'll do it. *Despite* the baby. *Despite everything*. You're a good person, Next. A *fine* human being. It will be your downfall. I'm counting on it."

She leaned forwards and whispered in my ear.

"They're wrong, you know, Thursday. Revenge is *so* sweet!"

"Thursday?" asked Wilbur. "Are you all right?"

"No, not really," I muttered as I saw the clock tick into the final minute. Acheron was nothing compared to Aornis, either in his powers or his sense of humor. I'd messed with the Hades family and now I was paying the price.

I pulled out my automatic as the clock ticked into the last half minute.

"If Landen ever comes back, tell him I love him."

Twenty seconds.

"If *who* ever comes back?"

"Landen. You'll know him when you see him. Tall, one leg, writes daft books and had a wife named Thursday who loved him beyond comprehension."

Ten seconds.

"So long, Wilbur."

I closed my eyes and placed the gun to my temple.

### 33.

## The Dawn of Life as We Know It

Three billion years ago the atmosphere on earth had stabilized to what scientists referred to as A-II. The relentless hammering of the atmosphere had created the ozone layer, which in turn now stopped new oxygen from being produced. A new and totally different mechanism was needed to kick-start the young planet into the living green ball that we know and enjoy today.

DR. LUCIANO SPAGBOG,  
*How I Think Life Began on Earth*

NO NEED FOR THAT," said my father, gently taking the gun from my hand and laying it on the table. I don't know whether he purposely arrived late to increase the drama, but there he was. He hadn't frozen time--I think he was done with that. Whenever he had appeared in the past he had always been smiles and cheeriness, but today he was different. And he looked, for the first time ever, *old*. Perhaps eighty--maybe more.

He thrust his hand inside the nanodevice container as the final generator failed. The small blob of nanotechnology fell on his hand, and the emergency lights flicked on, bathing us all in a dim green glow.

"It's cold," he said. "How long have I got?"

"It has to warm up first," replied Wilbur glumly. "Three minutes?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, sweetpea, but self-sacrifice is *not* the answer."

"It was all I had left, Dad. Me alone or me *and* three billion souls."

"You don't get to make that decision, Thursday, *but I do*. You've got a lot of good work to do, and your son, too. Me, I'm just glad that it all ends before I become so enfeebled as to be useless."

"Dad--!"

I felt the tears start to roll down my cheeks. There was so much I wanted to ask him. There always is.

"It all seems so clear to me now!" he said, smiling as he cupped his hand so none of the all-consuming Dream Topping would fall to the ground. "After several million years of existence I finally realized my purpose. Will you tell your mother there was *absolutely nothing* between me and Emma Hamilton?"

"Oh--Dad! Don't, please!"

"And tell Joffy I forgive him for breaking the windows of the greenhouse."

I hugged him tightly.

"I'll miss you. And your mother of course, and Seve, Louis Armstrong, the Nolan Sisters--which reminds me, did you get any tickets?"

"Third row, but--but--I don't suppose you'll need them now."

"You never know," he murmured. "Leave my ticket at the box office, will you?"

"Dad, there must be *something* we can do for you, surely?"

"No, my darling, I'm going to be out of here pretty soon. *The Great Leap Forward*. The thing is, I wonder where to? Was there anything in the Dream Topping that shouldn't have been there?"

"Chlorophyll."

He smiled and sniffed the carnation in his buttonhole. "Yes, I thought as much. It's all *very* simple, really--and quite ingenious. Chlorophyll is the key--Ow!"

I looked at his hand. His skin and flesh were starting to swirl as the wayward nanodevice thawed enough to start work, devouring, changing and replicating with ever-increasing speed.

I looked at him, wanting to ask a hundred questions but not knowing where to start.

"I'm going three billion years in the past, Thursday, to a planet with only the *possibility* of life. A planet waiting for a miraculous event, something that has not happened, as far as we know it, anywhere else in the universe. In a word, *photosynthesis*. An oxidizing atmosphere, sweetpea--the ideal way to start an embryonic biosphere."

He laughed.

"It's funny the way things turn out, isn't it? All life on earth descended from the organic compounds and proteins contained within Dream Topping."

"And the carnation. And you."

He smiled at me.

"Me. Yes. I thought this might be the ending, *the Big One*-- but in fact it's really only just the beginning. And I'm it. Makes me feel all sort of, well, *humble*."

He touched my face with his good hand and kissed me on the cheek.

"Don't cry, Thursday. It's how it happens. It's how it has *always* happened, always *will* happened. Take my chronograph; I'm not going to need it anymore."

I unstrapped the heavy watch from his good wrist as the smell of artificial strawberries filled the room. It was Dad's hand. It had almost completely changed to pudding. It was time for him to go, and he knew it.

"Goodbye, Thursday. I never could have wished for a finer daughter."



I composed myself. I didn't want his last memory of me to be of a sniveling wretch. I wanted him to see I could be as strong as he was. I pursed my lips and wiped the tears from my eyes.

"Goodbye, Dad."

He winked at me.

"Well, time waits for no man, as we say."

He smiled again and started to fold and collapse and spiral into a single dot, much like water escaping from a plughole. I could feel myself tugged into the event, so I took a step back as my father vanished into himself with a very quiet *plop* as he traveled into the deep past. A final gravitational tug dislodged one of my shirt buttons; the wayward pearl fastener sailed through the air and was caught in the small rippling vortex. It vanished from sight, and the air rocked for a moment before settling down to that usual state that we refer to as *normality*.

My father had gone.

The lights flickered back on as entropy returned to normal. Aornis's boldly audacious plan for revenge had backfired badly. She had, perversely enough, actually *given* us all life. And after all that talk about irony. She'd probably be kicking herself all the way to TopShop. Dad was right. It *is* funny the way things turn out.

I sat through the Nolan Sisters concert that evening with an empty seat beside me, glancing at the door to see if he would arrive. I hardly even heard the music--I was thinking instead of a lonely foreshore on a planet devoid of any life, a person who had once been my father sloughing away to his component parts. Then I thought of the resultant proteins, now much replicated and evolved, working on the atmosphere. They released oxygen and combined hydrogen with carbon dioxide to form simple food molecules. Within a few hundred million years the atmosphere would be full of free oxygen; aerobic life could begin--and a couple of billion years after that, something slimy would start wriggling onto land. It was an inauspicious start, but now there was a sort of family pride attached to it. He wasn't just *my* father but *everyone's* father. As the Nolans performed "Goodbye Nothing to Say," I sat in quiet introspection, regretting, as children always do upon the death of a parent, all the things we never said nor ever did. But my biggest regret was far more mundane: Since his identity and existence had been scrubbed by the ChronoGuard, I never knew, nor ever asked him--*his name*.

## 34.

### The Well of Lost Plots

**Character Exchange Program:** If a character from one book looks suspiciously like another from the same author, more than likely, they are. There is a certain degree of economy that runs through the bookworld, and personages from one book are often asked to stand in for others. Sometimes a single character may play another in the same book, which lends a comedic tone to the proceedings if they have to talk to themselves. Margot Metroland once told me that playing the same person over and over and over again was as tiresome as "an actress condemned to the same part in a provincial repertory theater for eternity with no holiday." After a spate of illegal PageRunning (q.v.) by bored and disgruntled bookpeople, the Character Exchange Program was set up to allow a change of scenery. In any year there are close to ten thousand exchanges, few of which result in any major plot or dialogue infringements. The reader rarely suspects anything at all.

UNITARY AUTHORITY OF WARRINGTON CAT,  
*The Jurisdiction Guide to the Great Library* (glossary)

I SLEPT OVER at Joffy's place. I say slept, but that wasn't entirely accurate. I just stared at the elegantly molded ceiling and thought of Landen. At dawn I crept quietly out of the vicarage, borrowed Joffy's Brough Superior motorcycle and rode into Swindon as the sun crept over the horizon. The bright rays of a new day usually filled me with hope, but that morning I could think only of unfinished business and an uncertain future. I rode through the empty streets, past Coate and up the Marlborough road towards my mother's house. She had to know about Dad, however painful the news might be, and I hoped she would take solace, as I did, in his final selfless act. I would go to the station and hand myself in to Flanker afterwards. There was a good chance that SO-5 would believe my account of what happened with Aornis, but I suspected that convincing SO-1 of Lavoisier's chronuption might take a lot more. Goliath and the two Schitts were a worry, but I was sure I would be able to think of *something* to keep them off my back. Still, the world hadn't ended yesterday, which was a big plus--and Flanker couldn't exactly charge me with "failing to save the planet *his* way," no matter how much he might want to.

As I approached the junction outside Mum's house I noticed a car that looked suspiciously Goliathesque parked across the street, so I rode on and did a wide circuit, abandoning the motorcycle two blocks away and treading noiselessly down the back alleys. I skirted around another large dark blue Goliath motorcar, climbed over the fence into Mum's garden and crept past the vegetable patch to the kitchen door. It was locked, so I pushed open the large dodo flap and crawled

inside. I was just about to switch on the lights when I felt the cold barrel of a gun pressed against my cheek. I started and almost cried out.

"Lights stay *off*," growled a husky woman's voice, "and don't make any sudden moves."

I dutifully froze. A hand snaked into my jacket and removed Cordelia's pistol. DH-82 was fast asleep in his basket; the idea of being a fierce guard-Taswolf had obviously not entered his head.

"Let me see you," said the voice again. I turned and looked into the eyes of a woman who had departed more rapidly into middle age than years alone might allow. I noticed that her gun arm wavered slightly, she had a slightly florid appearance and her hair had been clumsily brushed and pulled into a bun. But for all that it was clear she had once been beautiful; her eyes were bright and cheerful, her mouth delicate and refined, her bearing resolute.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"This is my mother's house."

"Ah!" she said, giving a slight whisper of a smile and raising an eyebrow. "You must be Thursday."

She returned her pistol to a holster that was strapped to her thigh beneath several layers of her large brocade dress and started to rummage in the cupboards.

"Do you know where your mother keeps the booze?"

"Suppose you tell me who *you* are?" I demanded, my eyes alighting on the knife block as I searched for a weapon--just in case.

The woman didn't give me an answer, or, at least, not to the question I'd asked.

"Your father told me Lavoisier eradicated your husband."

I halted my surreptitious creep towards the carving knives.

"You know my father?" I asked in some surprise.

"I do so hate that term *eradicated*," she announced grimly, searching in vain amongst the tinned fruit for anything resembling alcohol. "It's murder, Thursday--nothing less. They killed my husband, too--even if it did take three attempts."

"Who?"

"Lavoisier and the French revisionists."

She thumped her fist on the kitchen top as if to punctuate her anger and turned to face me.

"You have memories of your husband, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Me too," she sighed. "I wish to heaven I hadn't, but I have. Memories of things that *might* have happened. Knowledge of the loss. It's the worst part of it."

She opened another cupboard door, revealing still more tinned fruit.

"I understand your husband was barely two years old-- mine was forty-seven. You might think that makes it better, but it doesn't. The petition for his divorce was granted and we were married the summer following Trafalgar. Nine years of glorious life as Lady Nelson--then I wake up one morning in Calais, a drunken, debt-ridden wretch, and with the revelation that my one true love died a decade ago, shot by a sniper's bullet on the quarterdeck of the *Victory*."

"I know who you are," I murmured. "You're Emma Hamilton."

"I was Emma Hamilton," she replied sadly. "Now I'm a broke out-of-timer with a dismal reputation, no husband and a thirst the size of the Gobi."

"But you still have your daughter?"

"Yes," she groaned, "but I never told her I was her mother."

"Try the end cupboard."

She moved down the counter, rummaged some more and found a bottle of cooking sherry. She poured a generous helping into one of my mother's teacups. I looked at the saddened woman and wondered if I'd end up the same way.

"We'll sort out Lavoisier eventually," muttered Lady Hamilton sadly, downing the cooking sherry. "You can be sure of that."

"We?"

She looked at me and poured another generous--even by my mother's definition--cup of sherry.

"Me--and your father, of course."

I sighed. She obviously hadn't heard the news.

"That's what I came to talk to my mother about."

"What did you come to talk to me about?"

It was my mother. She had just walked in wearing a quilted dressing gown with her hair sticking in all directions. For someone usually so suspicious of Emma Hamilton, she seemed quite cordial and even wished her good morning--although she swiftly removed the sherry from the counter and replaced it in the cupboard.

"You early bird!" she cooed. "Do you have time to take DH-82 to the vet's this morning? His boil needs lancing again."

"I'm kind of busy, Mum."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, sensing the seriousness in my voice. "Was that business at Vole Towers anything to do with you?"

"Sort of. I came over to tell you--"

"Yes?"

"That Dad has--Dad is--Dad was--"

Mum looked at me quizzically as my father, large as life, strode into the kitchen.

"--is making me feel *very* confused."

"Hello, sweetpea!" said my father, looking considerably younger

than the last time I saw him. "Have you been introduced to Lady Hamilton?"

"We had a drink together," I said uncertainly. "But--you're-- you're--*alive!*"

He stroked his chin and replied: "Should I be something else?"

I thought for a moment and furtively shook my cuff down to hide his ChronoGraph on my wrist.

"No--I mean, that is to say--"

But he had twigged me already.

"Don't tell me! I don't want to know!"

He stood next to Mum and placed an arm round her waist. It was the first time I had seen them together for nearly seventeen years.

"But--"

"You mustn't be so *linear*," said my father. "Although I try to visit only in *your* chronological order, sometimes it's not possible."

He paused.

"Did I suffer much pain?"

"No--none at all," I lied.

"It's funny," he said as he filled the kettle, "I can recall everything up until final curtain minus ten, but after that it's all a bit fuzzy--I can vaguely see a rugged coastline and the sunset on a calm ocean, but other than that, nothing. I've seen and done a lot in my time, but my entry and exit will *always* remain a mystery. It's better that way. Stops me getting cold feet and trying to change them."

He spooned some coffee into the Cafetiere. I was glad to see that I had only witnessed Dad's death and not the end of his life, as the two, I learned, are barely related at all.

"How are things, by the way?" he asked.

"Well," I began, unsure of where to start, "the world didn't end yesterday."

He looked at the low winter sun that was shining through the kitchen windows.

"So I see. Good job too. An Armageddon right now might have been awkward. Have you had any breakfast?"

"Awkward? Global destruction would be *awkward*?"

"Decidedly so. *Tiresome* almost," replied my father thoughtfully. "The end of the world could *really* louse up my plans. Tell me, did you manage to get me a ticket to the Nolans' concert last night?"

I thought quickly.

"Er--no, Dad--sorry. They'd all sold out."

There was another pause. Mum nudged her husband, who looked at her oddly. It looked as if she wanted him to say something.

"Thursday," she began when it became obvious that Dad wasn't going to take her cue, "your father and I think you should take some

leave until our *first* grandchild is born. Somewhere safe. Somewhere *other*."

"Oh yes!" added Dad with a start. "With Goliath, Aornis and Lavoisier after you, the herenow is not *exactly* the best place to be."

"I can look after myself."

"I thought I could too," grumbled Lady Hamilton, gazing longingly at the cupboard where the cooking sherry was hidden.

"I *will* get Landen back," I replied resolutely.

"Perhaps *now* you might be physically up to it--but what happens in six months' time? You need a break, Thursday, and you need to take it now. Of course, you must fight--but fight with a level playing field."

"Mum?"

"It makes sense, darling."

I rubbed my head and sat on one of the kitchen chairs. It *did* seem to be a good idea.

"What have you in mind?"

Mum and Dad exchanged looks.

"I could downstream you to the sixteenth century or something, but good medical care would be hard to come by. Upstreaming is too risky--and besides, SO-12 would soon find you. No, if you're going to go anywhere, it will have to be *sideways*."

He came and sat down next to me.

"Henshaw at SO-3 owes me a favor. Between the two of us we could slip you sideways into a world where Landen *doesn't* drown aged two."

"You could?" I replied, suddenly perking up.

"Sure. But steady on. It's not so simple. A lot will be . . . *different*."

My euphoria was short-lived. A prickle rose on my scalp.

"How different?"

"*Very* different. You won't be in SO-27. In fact, there won't be any SpecOps at all. The Second World War will finish in 1945 and the Crimean conflict won't last much beyond 1854."

"I see. No Crimean War? Does that mean Anton will still be alive?"

"It does."

"Then let's do it, Dad."

He laid a hand on mine and squeezed it.

"There's more. It's your decision, and you have to know *precisely* what is involved. *Everything* will be gone. All the work you've ever done, all the work you *will* do. There will be no dodos or neanderthals, no Willspeak machines, no Gravitube--"

"No Gravitube? How do people get around?"

"In things called *jetliners*. Large passenger aircraft that can fly seven miles high at three-quarters of the speed of sound-- some even faster."

It was plainly a ridiculous idea, and I told him.

"I know it's far-fetched, sweetpea, but you'll never know any

different. The Gravitube will seem as impossible there as jetliners do here."

"What about mammoths?"

"No--but there will be ducks."

"Goliath?"

"Under a different name."

I was quiet for a moment.

"Will there be *Jane Eyre*?"

"Yes," sighed my father. "Yes, there will always be *Jane Eyre*."

"And Turner? Will he still paint *The Fighting Temeraire*?"

"Yes, and Carravaggggio will be there too, although his name will be spelt more sensibly."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

My father was silent for a moment.

"There's a catch."

"What sort of catch?"

He sighed.

"Landen will be back, but you and he won't have met. Landen won't even *know* you."

"But I'll know him. I can introduce myself, can't I?"

"Thursday, you're not part of this. You're outside of it. You'll still be carrying Landen's child, but you won't know the sideslip has ever happened. You will remember nothing about your old life. If you want to go sideways to see him, then you'll have to have a new past and a new present. Perversely enough, to be able to see him, you *cannot* have any recollection of him--nor he of you."

"That's some catch," I observed.

"It's the second-best there is," Dad agreed.

I thought for a moment.

"So I won't be in love with him?"

"I'm afraid not. You might have a small residual memory-- feelings that you can't explain for someone you've never met."

"Will I be confused?"

"Yes."

He looked at me with an earnest expression. They all did. Even Lady Hamilton, who had been moving quietly towards the sherry, stopped and was staring at me. It was clear that making myself scarce was something I had to do. But having zero recollection of Landen? I didn't really have to think very hard.

"No, Dad. Thanks, but no thanks."

"I don't think you understand," he intoned, using his paternal go-to-your-room-young-lady voice. "In a year's time you can come back and everything will be as right as--"

"No. I'm not losing any more of Landen than I have already."

I had an idea.

"Besides, I do have somewhere I can go."

"Where?" inquired my father. "Where could you possibly go that Lavoisier couldn't find you? Backwards, forwards, sideways, otherways--there isn't anywhere else!"

I smiled.

"You're wrong, Dad. There *is* somewhere. A place where no one will ever find me--not even you."

"Sweetpea--!" he implored. "It is *imperative* that you take this seriously! Where will you go?"

"I'll just," I replied slowly, "lose myself in a good book."

Despite their pleading, I bade farewell to Mum, Dad and Lady Hamilton, crept out of the house and sped to my apartment on Joffy's motorbike. I parked outside the front door in clear defiance of the Goliath and SpecOps agents who were still waiting for me. I ambled slowly in; it would take them twenty minutes or more to report to base and then get up the stairs and break down the door--and I really only needed to pack a few things. I still had my memories of Landen, and they would sustain me until I got him back. Because I *would* get him back--but I needed time to rest and recuperate and bring our child into the world with the minimum of fuss, bother and interruptions. I packed four tins of Moggilicious cat food, two packets of Mintolas, a large jar of Marmite and two dozen AA batteries into a large holdall along with a few changes of clothing, a picture of my family and the copy of *Jane Eyre* with the bullet lodged in the cover. I placed a sleepy and confused Pickwick and her egg into the holdall and zipped up the bag so that only her head stuck out. I then sat and waited on a chair in front of the door with a copy of *Great Expectations* on my lap. I wasn't a natural bookjumper, and without my travelbook I was going to need the fear of capture to help catapult me through the boundaries of fiction.

I started to read at the first knock on the door and continued through the volley of shouts for me to open up, past the muffled thuds and the sound of splintered wood, until finally, as the door fell in, I melted into the dingy interior of *Great Expectations* and Satis House.

Miss Havisham was understandably shocked when I explained what I needed, and even more shocked at the sight of Pickwick, but she consented to my request and cleared it with the Bellman-- on the proviso that I'd continue with my training. I was hurriedly inducted into the Character Exchange Program and given a secondary part in an unpublished book deep within the Well of Lost Plots--the woman I



was replacing had for some time wanted to take a course in drama at the Reading Academy of Dramatic Arts, so it suited her equally well. As I wandered down to subbasement six, Exchange Program docket in hand made out to someone named Briggs, I felt more relaxed than I had for weeks. I found the correct book sandwiched between the first draft of an adventure in the Tasman Sea and a vague notion of a comedy set in Bomber Command. I picked it up, took it to one of the reading tables and quietly read myself into my new home.

I found myself on the banks of a reservoir somewhere in the home counties. It was summer and the air smelt warm and sweet after the wintry conditions back home. I was standing on a wooden jetty in front of a large and seemingly derelict flying boat, which rocked gently in the breeze, tugging on the mooring ropes. A woman had just stepped out of a door in the high-sided hull; she was holding a suitcase.

"Hello!" she shouted, running up and offering me a hand. "I'm Mary. You must be Thursday. My goodness! What's that?"

"A dodo. Her name's Pickwick."

"I thought they were extinct."

"Not where I come from. Is this where I'm going to live?" I was pointing at the shabby flying boat dubiously.

"I know what you're thinking," smiled Mary proudly. "Isn't she just the most beautiful thing ever? Short Sunderland; built in 1943 but last flew in '54. I'm midway converting her to a houseboat, but don't feel shy if you want to help out. Just keep the bilges pumped out, and if you can run the number three engine once a month I'd be very grateful."

"Er--okay," I stammered.

"Good. I've left a rough precis of the story taped to the fridge, but don't worry too much--since we're not published you can do pretty much what you want. Any problems, ask Captain Nemo who lives on the *Nautilus* two boats down, and don't worry, Jack might seem gruff to begin with, but he has a heart of gold, and if he asks you to drive his Austin Allegro, make sure you depress the clutch fully before changing gear. Did the Bellman supply you with all the necessary paperwork and fake IDs?"

I patted my pocket, and she handed me a scrap of paper and a bunch of keys.

"Good. This is my footnoterphone number in case of emergencies, these are the keys to the flying boat and my BMW. If someone named Arnold calls, tell him he had his chance and he blew it. Any questions?"

"I don't think so."

She smiled.

"Then we're done. You'll like it here. It's pretty odd. I'll see you in about a year. So long!"

She gave a cheery wave and walked off up the dusty track. I looked across the lake at the faraway dinghies, then watched a pair of swans beating their wings furiously and pedaling the water to take off. I sat down on a rickety wooden seat and let Pickwick out of the bag. It wasn't home but it looked pleasant enough. Landen's reactualization was in the uncharted future, along with Aornis's and Goliath's comeuppance--but all in good time. I would miss Mum, Dad, Joffy, Bowden, Victor and maybe even Cordelia. But it wasn't *all* bad news--at least this way I wouldn't have to do *The Thursday Next Workout Video*.

As my father said, it's funny the way things turn out.

*This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's Imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.*

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THURSDAY NEXT  
IN

*The Well  
of  
Lost Plots*

A NOVEL

**Jasper Fforde**



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

The Well of Lost Plots

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*For Mari*

who makes the torches burn brighter

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Credits



## ***Thursday Next: The Story So Far . . .***

Swindon, Wessex, England, circa 1985. SpecOps is the agency responsible for policing areas considered too specialized to be tackled by the regular force, and Thursday Next is attached to the Literary Detectives at SpecOps-27. Following the successful return of Jane Eyre to the novel of the same name, vanquishing master criminal Acheron Hades and bringing peace to the Crimean peninsula, she finds herself a minor celebrity.

On the trail of the seemingly miraculous discovery of the lost Shakespeare play *Cardenio*, she crosses swords with Yorrick Kaine, escapee from fiction and neofascist politician. She also finds herself blackmailed by the vast multinational known as the Goliath Corporation, who want their operative Jack Schitt out of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," in which he was imprisoned. To achieve this they call on Lavoisier, a corrupt member of the time-traveling SpecOps elite, the ChronoGuard, to kill off Thursday's husband. Traveling back thirty-eight years, Lavoisier engineers a fatal accident for the two-year-old Landen, but leaves Thursday's memories of him intact--she finds herself the only person who knows he once lived.

In an attempt to rescue her eradicated husband, she finds a way to enter fiction itself--and discovers that not only is there a policing agency within the BookWorld known as Jurisfiction, but that she has been apprenticed as a trainee agent to Miss Havisham of *Great Expectations*. With her skills at bookjumping growing under Miss Havisham's stern and often unorthodox tuition, Thursday rescues Jack Schitt, only to discover she has been duped. Goliath has no intention of reactualizing her husband and instead wants her to open a door into fiction, something Goliath has decided is a "rich untapped marketplace" for their varied but spectacularly worthless products and services.

Thursday, pregnant with Landen's child and pursued by Goliath and Acheron's little sister, Aornis, an evil genius with a penchant for clothes shopping and memory modification,

decides to enter the BookWorld and retire temporarily to the place where all fiction is created: the Well of Lost Plots. Taking refuge in an unpublished book of dubious quality as part of the Character Exchange Program, she *thinks* she will have a quiet time.

## ***Author's Note***

To those unfamiliar with the pronunciation of English provincial towns, this is how I pronounce them:

*Slough* rhymes with *wow* and is *never* pronounced *Sluff*.

*Reading* is pronounced as in *Otis Redding*.

*Goring* rhymes with *boring*.

*Cheltenham* is pronounced *Chelt-num*.

*Warwickshire* is pronounced *war-rick-shy-er*.

*Hobble* is pronounced *limp*.

Mouse your way to my Web site at [www.jasperfforde.com](http://www.jasperfforde.com)

This book has been bundled with special features including "The Making of" documentary, deleted scenes from all three books, outtakes and much more. To access all these free bonus features, log on to [www.jasperfforde.com/specialfeatures.html](http://www.jasperfforde.com/specialfeatures.html) and enter the code word as directed.

# 1.

## The Absence of Breakfast

**The Well of Lost Plots.** To understand the Well you have to have an idea of the layout of the Great Library. The library is where all published fiction is stored so it can be read by the readers in the Outland; there are twenty-six floors, one for each letter of the alphabet. The library is constructed in the layout of a cross with the four corridors radiating from the center point. On all the walls, end after end, shelf after shelf, are *books*. Hundreds, thousands, millions of books. Hardbacks, paperbacks, leatherbound, everything. But the similarity of all these books to the copies we read back home is no more than the similarity a photograph has to its subject; these books are *alive*.

Beneath the Great Library are twenty-six floors of dingy yet industrious subbasements known as the Well of Lost Plots. This is where books are constructed, honed and polished in readiness for a place in the library above--if they make it that far. The failure rate is high. Unpublished books outnumber published by an estimated eight to one.

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*The Jurisfiction Chronicles*

**M**AKING ONE'S HOME in an unpublished novel wasn't without its compensations. All the boring day-to-day mundanities that we conduct in the real world get in the way of narrative flow and are thus generally avoided. The car didn't need refueling, there were never any wrong numbers, there was always enough hot water, and vacuum cleaner bags came in only two sizes--upright and pull along. There were other more subtle differences, too. For instance, no one ever needed to repeat themselves in case you didn't hear, no one shared the same name, talked at the same time or had a word annoyingly "on the tip of their tongue." Best of all, the bad guy was always someone you knew of, and--Chaucer aside--there wasn't much farting. But there were some downsides. The relative absence of breakfast was the first and most notable difference to my daily timetable. Inside books, dinners are often written about and therefore feature frequently, as do lunches and afternoon

tea; probably because they offer more opportunities to further the story.

Breakfast wasn't all that was missing. There was a peculiar lack of cinemas, wallpaper, toilets, colors, books, animals, underwear, smells, haircuts, and strangely enough, minor illnesses. If someone was ill in a book, it was either terminal and dramatically unpleasant or a mild head cold--there wasn't much in between.

I was able to take up residence inside fiction by virtue of a scheme entitled the Character Exchange Program. Due to a spate of bored and disgruntled bookpeople escaping from their novels and becoming what we called PageRunners, the authorities set up the scheme to allow characters a change of scenery. In any year there are close to ten thousand exchanges, few of which result in any major plot or dialogue infringements--the reader rarely suspects anything at all. Since I was from the real world and not actually a character at all, the Bellman and Miss Havisham had agreed to let me live inside the BookWorld in exchange for helping out at Jurisfiction--at least as long as my pregnancy would allow.

The choice of book for my self-enforced exile had not been arbitrary; when Miss Havisham asked me in which novel I would care to reside, I had thought long and hard. *Robinson Crusoe* would have been ideal considering the climate, but there was no one female to exchange with. I could have gone to *Pride and Prejudice*, but I wasn't wild about high collars, bonnets, corsets--and delicate manners. No, to avoid any complications and reduce the possibility of having to move, I had decided to make my home in a book of such dubious and uneven quality that publication and my subsequent enforced ejection was unlikely in the extreme. I found just such a book deep within the Well of Lost Plots amongst failed attempts at prose and half-finished epics of such dazzling ineptness that they would never see the light of day. The book was a dreary crime thriller set in Reading entitled *Caversham Heights*. I had planned to stay there for only a year, but it didn't work out that way. Plans with me are like De Floss novels--try as you might, you never know *quite* how they are going to turn out.

I read my way into *Caversham Heights*. The air felt warm after the wintry conditions back home, and I found myself standing on a wooden jetty at the edge of a lake. In front of me there was a large and seemingly derelict flying boat of the sort that still plied the coastal routes back home. I had flown on one myself not six months before on the trail of someone claiming to have found some unpublished Burns poetry. But that was another lifetime ago, when I was SpecOps in Swindon, the world I had temporarily left behind.

The ancient flying boat rocked gently in the breeze, tautening the mooring ropes and creaking gently, the water gently slapping against the hull. As I watched the old aircraft, wondering just how long something this decrepit could stay afloat, a well-dressed young woman stepped out of an oval-shaped door in the high-sided hull. She was carrying a suitcase. I had read the novel of *Caversham Heights* so I knew Mary well although she didn't know me.

"Hullo!" she shouted, trotting up and offering me a hand. "I'm Mary. You must be Thursday. My goodness! What's that?"

"A dodo. Her name's Pickwick."

Pickwick plocked and stared at Mary suspiciously.

"Really?" she replied, looking at the bird curiously. "I'm no expert of course but--I *thought* dodoes were extinct."

"Where I come from, they're a bit of a pest."

"Oh?" mused Mary. "I'm not sure I've heard of a book with *live* dodoes in it."

"I'm not a bookperson," I told her, "I'm real."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mary, opening her eyes wide. "An *Outlander*."

She touched me inquisitively with a slender index finger as though I might be made of glass.

"I've never seen someone from the other side before," she announced, clearly relieved to find that I wasn't going to shatter into a thousand pieces. "Tell me, is it true you have to cut your hair on a regular basis? I mean, your hair actually *grows*?"

"Yes"--I smiled--"and my fingernails, too."

"Really?" mused Mary. "I've heard rumors about that but I thought it was just one of those Outlandish legends. I suppose

you have to eat, too? To stay alive, I mean, not just when the story calls for it?"

"One of the great pleasures of life," I assured her.

I didn't think I'd tell her about real-world downsides such as tooth decay, incontinence, or old age. Mary lived in a three-year window and neither aged, died, married, had children, got sick or changed in any way. Although appearing resolute and strong-minded, she was only like this because she was *written* that way. For all her qualities, Mary was simply a foil to Jack Spratt, the detective in *Caversham Heights*, the loyal sergeant figure to whom Jack explained things so the readers knew what was going on. She was what writers called an *expositional*, but I'd never be as impolite to say so to her face.

"Is this where I'm going to live?" I was pointing at the shabby flying boat.

"I know what you're thinking." Mary smiled proudly. "Isn't she just the most beautiful thing ever? She's a Sunderland; built in 1943 but last flew in '68. I'm midway converting her to a houseboat, but don't feel shy if you want to help out. Just keep the bilges pumped out, and if you can run the number three engine once a month, I'd be very grateful--the start-up checklist is on the flight deck."

"Well--okay," I muttered.

"Good. I've left a precis of the story taped to the fridge and a rough idea of what you have to say, but don't worry about being word perfect; since we're not published, you can say almost anything you want--within reason, of course."

"Of course." I thought for a moment. "I'm new to the Character Exchange Program. When will I be called to do something?"

"Wyatt is the inbook exchange liaison officer; he'll let you know. Jack might seem gruff to begin with," continued Mary, "but he has a heart of gold. If he asks you to drive his Austin Allegro, make sure you depress the clutch fully before changing gear. He takes his coffee black and the love interest between myself and DC Baker is *strictly* unrequited, is that clear?"

"Very clear," I returned, thankful I would not have to do any love scenes.

"Good. Did they supply you with all the necessary paperwork, IDs, that sort of thing?"

I patted my pocket and she handed me a scrap of paper and a bunch of keys.

"Good. This is my footnoterphone number in case of emergencies, these are the keys to the flying boat and my BMW. If a loser named Arnold calls, tell him I hope he rots in hell. Any questions?"

"I don't think so."

She smiled as a yellow cab with *TransGenre Taxis* painted on the side materialized in front of us. The cabbie looked bored and Mary opened the passenger door.

"Then we're done. You'll like it here. I'll see you in about a year. So long!"

She turned to the cabbie, muttered, "Get me out of this book," and she and the car faded out, leaving me alone on the dusty track.

I sat upon a rickety wooden seat next to a tub of long-dead flowers and let Pickwick out of her bag. She ruffled her feathers indignantly and blinked in the sunlight. I looked across the lake at the sailing dinghies that were little more than brightly colored triangles that tacked backwards and forwards in the distance. Nearer to shore a pair of swans beat their wings furiously and pedaled the water in an attempt to take off, landing almost as soon as they were airborne, throwing up a long streak of spray on the calm waters. It seemed a lot of effort to go a few hundred yards.

I turned my attention to the flying boat. The layers of paint that covered and protected the riveted hull had partly peeled off to reveal the colorful livery of long-forgotten airlines beneath. The Perspex windows had clouded with age, and high in the massive wing untidy cables hung lazily from the oil-stained cowlings of the three empty engine bays, their safe inaccessibility now a haven for nesting birds. Goliath, Aornis, and SpecOps seemed a million miles away--but then, so did Landen. *Landen*. Memories of my husband were never far away. I thought of all the times we had spent together that hadn't actually happened. All the places we hadn't visited, all the things we hadn't done. He might have been eradicated at



the age of two, but I still had our memories--just no one to share them with.

I was interrupted from my thoughts by the sound of a motorcycle approaching. The rider didn't have much control of the vehicle; I was glad that he stopped short of the jetty--his erratic riding might well have led him straight into the lake.

"Hullo!" he said cheerfully, removing his helmet to reveal a youngish man with a dark Mediterranean complexion and deep sunken eyes. "My name's Arnold. I haven't seen you around here before, have I?"

I got up and shook his hand.

"The name's Next. Thursday Next. Character Exchange Program."

"Oh, blast!" he muttered. "Blast and double blast! I suppose that means I've missed her?"

I nodded and he shook his head sadly.

"Did she leave a message for me?"

"Y-es," I said uncertainly. "She said she would, um, see you when she gets back."

"She did?" replied Arnold, brightening up. "That's a good sign. Normally she calls me a loser and tells me to go rot in hell."

"She probably won't be back for a while," I added, trying to make up for not passing on Mary's message properly, "maybe a year--maybe more."

"I see," he murmured, sighing deeply and staring off across the lake. He caught sight of Pickwick, who was attempting to outstare a strange aquatic bird with a rounded bill.

"What's that?" he asked suddenly.

"I think it's a duck, although I can't be sure--we don't have any where I come from."

"No, the other thing."

"A dodo."<sup>1</sup>

"What's the matter?" asked Arnold.

I was getting a footnoterphone signal; in the BookWorld people generally communicated like this.

"A footnoterphone call," I replied, "but it's not a message--it's like the wireless back home."<sup>2</sup>

Arnold stared at me. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"I'm from the other side of the page. What you call the Outland."<sup>3</sup>

He opened his eyes wide. "You mean--you're *real*?"

"I'm afraid so," I replied, slightly bemused.

"Goodness! Is it true that Outlanders can't say 'red-Buick-blue-Buick' many times quickly?"

"It's true. We call it a tongue twister."

"Fascinating! There's nothing like that *here*, you know. I can say 'The sixth sheikh's sixth sheep's sick' over and over as many times as I want!"

And he did, three times.

"Now you try."

I took a deep breath. "The sixth spleeps sics sleeks . . . sick."

Arnold laughed like a drain. I don't think he'd come across anything quite so funny in his life. I smiled.

"Do it again!"

"No thanks.<sup>4</sup> How do I stop this footnoterphone blabbering inside my skull?"

"Just think *Off* very strongly."

I did, and the footnoterphone stopped.

"Better?"

I nodded.

"You'll get the hang of it."

He thought for a minute, looked up and down the lake in an overtly innocent manner, then said, "Do you want to buy some verbs? Not any of your rubbish, either. Good, strong, healthy regulars--straight from the Text Sea--I have a friend on a scrawltrawler."

I smiled. "I don't think so, Arnold--and I don't think you should ask me--I'm Jurisdiction."

"Oh," said Arnold, looking pale all of a sudden. He bit his lip and gave such an imploring look that I almost laughed.

"Don't sweat," I told him, "I won't report it."

He sighed a deep sigh of relief, muttered his thanks, remounted his motorbike and drove off in a jerky fashion, narrowly missing the mailboxes at the top of the track.

The interior of the flying boat was lighter and more airy than I had imagined, but it smelt a bit musty. Mary was mistaken; she had not been halfway through the craft's

conversion--it was more like one-tenth. The walls were half-paneled with pine tongue-and-groove, and rock-wool insulation stuck out untidily along with unused electrical cables. There was room for two floors within the boat's cavernous hull, the downstairs a large, open-plan living room with a couple of old sofas pointing towards a television set. I tried to switch it on but it was dead--there was no TV in the BookWorld unless called for in the narrative. Much of what I could see around me were merely props, necessary for the chapter in which Jack Spratt visits the Sunderland to discuss the case. On the mantelpiece above a small wood-burning stove were pictures of Mary from her days at the police training college, and another from when she was promoted to detective sergeant.

I opened a door that led into a small kitchenette. Attached to the fridge was the precis of *Caversham Heights*. I flicked through it. The sequence of events was pretty much as I remembered from my first reading in the Well, although it seemed that Mary had overstated her role in some of the puzzle-solving areas. I put the precis down, found a bowl and filled it with water for Pickwick, took her egg from my bag and laid it on the sofa, where she quickly set about turning it over and tapping it gently with her beak. I went forward and discovered a bedroom where the nose turret would have been and climbed a narrow aluminum ladder to the flight deck directly above. This was the best view in the house, the large greenhouselike Perspex windows affording a vista of the lake. The massive control wheels were set in front of two comfortable chairs, and facing them and ahead of a tangled mass of engine control levers was a complex panel of broken and faded instruments. To my right I could see the one remaining engine, looking forlorn, the propeller blades streaked with bird droppings.

Behind the pilots' seats, where the flight engineer would have sat, there was a desk with reading lamp, footnoterphone and typewriter. On the bookshelf were mainly magazines of a police nature and lots of forensic textbooks. I walked through a narrow doorway and found a pleasant bedroom. The headroom was not overgenerous, but it was cozy and dry and

was paneled in pine with a porthole above the double bed. Behind the bedroom was a storeroom, a hot-water boiler, stacks of wood and a spiral staircase. I was just about to go downstairs when I heard someone speak from the living room below.

"What do you think that is?"

The voice had an empty ring to it and was neuter in its inflection--I couldn't tell if it was male or female.

I stopped and instinctively pulled my automatic from my shoulder holster. Mary lived alone--or so it had said in the book. As I moved slowly downstairs, I heard another voice answer the first: "I think it's a bird of some sort."

The second voice was no more distinctive than the first, and indeed, if the second voice had not been *answering* the first, I might have thought they belonged to the same person.

As I rounded the staircase, I saw two figures standing in the middle of the room staring at Pickwick, who stared back, courageously protecting her egg from behind a sofa.

"Hey!" I said, pointing my gun in their direction. "Hold it right there!"

The two figures looked up and stared at me without expression from features that were as insipid and muted as their voices. Because of their equal blandness it was impossible to tell them apart. Their arms hung limply by their sides, exhibiting no body language. They might have been angry or curious or worried or elated--but I couldn't tell.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"We are nobody," replied the one on the left.

"Everyone is *someone*," I replied.

"Not altogether correct," said the one on the right. "We have a code number but nothing more. I am TSI-1404912-A and this is TSI-1404912-C."

"What happened to B?"

"Taken by a grammasite last Tuesday."

I lowered my gun. Miss Havisham had told me about Generics. They were created here in the Well to populate the books that were to be written. At the point of creation they were simply a human canvas without paint--blank like a coin, ready to be stamped with individualism. They had no history,

no conflicts, no foibles--nothing that might make them either readable or interesting in any way. It was up to various institutions to teach them to be useful members of fiction. They were graded, too. A to D, one through ten. Any that were D-graded were like worker bees in crowds and busy streets. Small speaking parts were C-grades; B-grades usually made up the bulk of featured but not *leading* characters. These parts usually--but not always--went to the A-grades, handpicked for their skills at character projection and multidimensionality. Huckleberry Finn, Tess and Anna Karenina were all A-grades, but then so were Mr. Hyde, Hannibal Lecter and Professor Moriarty. I looked at the ungraded Generics again. Murderers or heroes? It was impossible to tell how they would turn out. Still, at this stage of their development they would be harmless. I reholstered my automatic.

"You're Generics, right?"

"Indeed," they said in unison.

"What are you doing here?"

"You remember the craze for minimalism?" asked the one on the right.

"Yes?" I replied, moving closer to stare at their blank faces curiously. There was a lot about the Well that I was going to have to get used to. They were harmless enough--but decidedly creepy. Pickwick was still hiding behind the sofa.

"It was caused by the 1982 character shortage," said the one on the left. "Vikram Seth is planning a large book in the next few years and I don't think the Well wants to be caught out again--we're being manufactured and then sent to stay in unpublished novels until we are called into service."

"Sort of stockpiled, you mean?"

"I'd prefer the word *billeted*," replied the one on the left, the slight indignation indicating that it wouldn't be without a personality forever.

"How long have you been here?"

"Two months," replied the one on the right. "We are awaiting placement at St. Tabularasa's Generic College for basic character training. I live in the spare bedroom in the tail."

"So do I," added the one on the left. "Likewise."

I paused for a moment. "O-kay. Since we all have to live together, I had better give you names. You," I said, pointing a finger at the one on the right, "are henceforth called *ibb*. You"--I pointed to the other--"are called *obb*."

I pointed at them again in case they had missed it as neither made any sign of comprehending what I'd said--or even hearing it.

"You are *ibb*, and you are *obb*."

I paused. Something didn't sound right about their names but I couldn't place it.

"*ibb*," I said to myself, then: "*obb. ibb. ibb-obb*. Does that sound strange to you?"

"No capitals," said *obb*. "We don't get capitalized until we start school--we didn't expect a name so soon, either. Can we keep it?"

"It's a gift from me," I told them.

"I am *ibb*," said *ibb*, as if to make the point.

"And I am *obb*," said *obb*.

"And I'm Thursday," I told them, offering my hand. They shook it in turn slowly and without emotion. I could see that this pair weren't going to be a huge bundle of fun.

"And that's Pickwick."

They looked at Pickwick, who plocked quietly, came out from behind the sofa, settled herself on her egg and pretended to go to sleep.

"Well," I announced, clapping my hands together, "does anyone know how to cook? I'm not very good at it and if you don't want to eat beans on toast for the next year, you had better start to learn. I'm standing in for Mary, and if you don't get in my way, I won't get in yours. I go to bed late and wake up early. I have a husband who doesn't exist and I'm going to have a baby later this year so I might get a little cranky--and overweight. Any questions?"

"Yes," said the one on the left. "Which one of us is *obb*, did you say?"

I unpacked my few things in the small room behind the flight deck. I had sketched a picture of Landen from memory and I placed it on the bedside table, staring at it for a moment. I

missed him dreadfully and wondered, for the umpteenth time, whether perhaps I shouldn't be here hiding, but out *there*, in my own world, trying to get him back. Trouble was, I'd tried that and made a complete pig's ear of it--if it hadn't have been for Miss Havisham's timely rescue, I would still be locked up in a Goliath vault somewhere. With our child growing within me I had decided that flight was not a coward's option but a sensible one--I would stay here until the baby was born. I could then plan my return, and following that, Landen's.

I went downstairs and explained to obb the rudiments of cooking, which were as alien to it as having a name. Fortunately I found an old copy of *Mrs. Beeton's Complete Housekeeper*, which I told obb to study, half-jokingly, as research. Three hours later it had roasted a perfect leg of lamb with all the trimmings. I had discovered one thing about Generics already: dull and uninteresting they may be--but they learn fast.

## 2.

### *Inside Caversham Heights*

Book/YGIO/1204961/: **Title:** *Caversham Heights*. UK, 1976, 90,000 words. **Genre:** Detective fiction. **Book Operating System:** BOOK V7.2. **Grammasite Infestation:** 1 (one) nesting pair of Parenthiums (protected). **Plot:** Routine detective thriller with stereotypical detective Jack Spratt. Set in Reading (England), the plot (such as it is) revolves around a drug czar hoping to muscle in on Reading's seedy underworld. Routine and unremarkable, *Caversham Heights* represents all the worst aspects of amateur writing. Flat characters, unconvincing police work and a pace so slow that snails pass it in the night. **Recommendation:** Unpublishable. Suggest book to be broken up for salvage at soonest available opportunity. **Current Status:** Awaiting Council of Genres Book Inspectorate's report before ordering demolition.

*Library Subbasement Gazetteer,*  
1982, volume CLXI

I DISCUSSED THE RUDIMENTS of breakfast with ibb and obb the following morning. I told them that cereal traditionally came *before* the bacon and eggs, but that toast and coffee had no fixed place within the meal; they had problems with the fact that marmalade was almost exclusively the preserve of breakfast, and I was just trying to explain the technical possibilities of dippy egg fingers when a copy of *The Toad* dropped on the mat. The only news story was about some sort of drug-related gang warfare in Reading. It was part of the plot in *Caversham Heights* and reminded me that sooner or later--and quite possibly sooner--I would be expected to take on the mantle of Mary as part of the Character Exchange Program. I had another careful read of the precis, which gave me a good idea of the plot chapter by chapter, but no precise dialogue or indication as to what I should be doing, or when. I didn't have to wonder very long as a knock at the door revealed an untidy man wearing a hat named Wyatt.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly, apologizing for the misrelated grammatical construction almost immediately, "Wyatt is *my*



name, not the hat's."

"I kind of figured that," I replied.

Wooden and worn with use, he was holding a clipboard.

"Oh, bother!" he said in the manner of someone who had just referred to George Eliot as "he" in a room full of English professors. "I've done it again!"

"Really, I don't mind," I repeated. "What can I do for you?"

"You're very kind. As a Character Exchange Program member, I would like to ask you to get yourself into Reading." He stopped and his shoulders sagged. "No, I'm *not* the Character Exchange Program member--you are. And *you* need to get into Reading."

"Sure. Do you have an address for me?"

Dog-eared and grubby, he handed me a note from his clipboard.

"Don't worry," I said before he could apologize again, "I understand."

His condition was almost certainly permanent, and since I didn't seem to care that much, he regained some confidence.

"Despite the ten-year demolition order hanging over us," he continued, "you should try and give it your best. The last Character Exchanger didn't take it seriously at all. Had to send him dusty and covered in asphalt on the road out of here."

He raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"I won't let you down," I assured him.

He thanked me, and small, brown and furry, the man with the hat named Wyatt raised it and vanished.

I took Mary's car and drove into Reading across the M4, which seemed as busy as it was back home; I used the same road myself when traveling between Swindon and London. Only when I was approaching the junction at the top of Burghfield road did I realize there were, at most, only a half dozen or so different vehicles on the roads. The vehicle that first drew my attention to this strange phenomenon was a large, white truck with *Dr. Spongg Footcare Products* painted on the side. I saw three in under a minute, all with an identical driver dressed in a blue boilersuit and flat cap. The next most obvious vehicle was a red VW Beetle driven by a young lady, then a battered

blue Morris Marina with an elderly man at the wheel. By the time I had drawn up outside the scene of *Caversham Heights'* first murder, I had counted forty-three white trucks, twenty-two red Beetles and sixteen identically battered Morris Marinas, not to mention several green Ford Escorts and a brace of white Chevrolets. It was obviously a limitation within the text and nothing more, so I hurriedly parked, read Mary's notes again to make sure I knew what I had to do, took a deep breath and walked across to the area that had been taped off. A few uniformed police officers were milling around. I showed my pass and ducked under the *Police: Do Not Cross* tape.

The yard was shaped as an oblong, fifteen feet wide and about twenty feet long, surrounded by a high redbrick wall with crumbling mortar. A large, white SOCO tent was over the scene, and a forensic pathologist, dictating notes into a tape recorder, was kneeling next to a well-described corpse.

"Hullo!" said a jovial voice close by. I turned to see a large man in a mackintosh grinning at me.

"Detective Sergeant Mary," I told him obediently. "Transferred here from Basingstoke."

"You don't have to worry about all that yet." He smiled. "The story is with Jack at the moment--he's meeting Officer Tibbit on the street outside. My name's DCI Briggs and I'm your friendly yet long-suffering boss in this little caper. Crusty and prone to outbursts of temper yet secretly supportive, I will have to suspend Jack at least once before the story is over."

"How do you do?" I spluttered.

"Excellent!" said Briggs, shaking my hand gratefully. "Mary told me you're with Jurisfiction. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Any news about when the Council of Genres Book Inspectorate will be in?" asked Briggs. "It would be a help to know. You've heard about the demolition order, I take it?"

"Council of Genres?" I echoed, trying not to make my ignorance show. "I'm sorry. I've not spent that much time in the BookWorld."

"An Outlander?" replied Briggs, eyes wide in wonderment. "Here, in *Caversham Heights*?"

"Yes, I'm--"

"Tell me, what do waves look like when they crash on the shore?"

"Who's an Outlander?" echoed the pathologist, a middle-aged Indian woman who suddenly leapt to her feet and stared at me intently. "You?"

"Y-es," I admitted.

"I'm Dr. Singh," explained the pathologist, shaking my hand vigorously. "I'm matter-of-fact, apparently without humor, like cats and people who like cats, don't suffer fools, yet on occasion I do exhibit a certain warmth. Tell me, do you think I'm anything like a *real* pathologist?"

"Of course," I answered, trying to think of her brief appearances in the book.

"You see," she went on with a slightly melancholic air, "I've never seen a *real* pathologist and I'm really not sure what I'm meant to do."

"You're doing fine," I assured her.

"What about me?" asked Briggs. "Do you think I need to develop more as a character? Am I like all those *real* people you rub shoulders with, or am I a bit one-dimensional?"

"Well--"

"I knew it!" he cried unhappily. "It's the hair, isn't it? Do you think it should be shorter? Longer? What about having a bizarre character trait? I've been learning the trombone--that would be unusual, yes?"

"Someone said there was an Outlander in the book!" interrupted a uniformed officer, one of a pair who had just walked into the yard. "I'm Unnamed Police Officer No. 1; this is my colleague, Unnamed Police Officer No. 2. Can I ask a question about the Outland?"

"Sure."

"What's the point of alphabet soup?"

"I don't know."

"Are you sure you're from the Outland?" he asked suspiciously. "Then tell me this: Why is there no singular for *scampi*?"

"I'm not sure."

"You're *not* from the Outland," said Unnamed Police Officer No. 1 sadly. "You should be ashamed of yourself, lying and

raising our hopes like that!"

"Very well," I replied, covering my eyes, "I'll prove it to you. Speak to me in turn but leave off your speech designators."

"Okay," said Unnamed Police Officer No. 1. "Who is this talking?"

"And who is this?" added Dr. Singh.

"I said leave *off* your speech designators. Try again."

"It's harder than you think," sighed Unnamed Police Officer No. 1. "Okay, here goes."

There was a pause.

"Which one of us is talking now?"

"And who am I?"

"Mrs. Singh first, Unnamed Police Officer No. 1 second. Was I correct?"

"Amazing!" murmured Mrs. Singh. "How do you do that?"

"I can recognize your voices. I have a sense of smell, too."

"No kidding? Do you know anyone in publishing?"

"None who would help. My husband is, or was, an author, but his contacts wouldn't know me from Eve at present. I'm a SpecOps officer; I don't have much to do with contemporary fiction."

"SpecOps?" queried UPO No. 2. "What's that?"

"We're going to be scrapped, you know," interrupted Briggs, "unless we can get a publisher."

"We could be broken down into *words*," added UPO No. 1 in a hushed tone, "cast into the Text Sea; and I have a wife and two kids--or at least, in my backstory I do."

"I can't help you," I told them, "I'm not even--"

"Places, please!" yelled Briggs so suddenly I jumped.

The pathologist and the two unnamed officers both hurried back to their places and awaited Jack, whom I could hear talking to someone in the house.

"Good luck," murmured Briggs from the side of his mouth as he motioned me to sit on a low wall. "I'll prompt you if you dry."

"Thanks."

**DCI Briggs was sitting on a low wall with a plainclothes policewoman who busied herself taking notes and did not**

look up. Briggs stood as Jack entered and looked at his watch in an unsubtle way. Jack answered the unasked question in the defensive, which he soon realized was a mistake.

"I'm sorry, sir, I came here as quick as I could."

Briggs grunted and waved a hand in the direction of the corpse.

"It looks like he died from gunshot wounds," he said grimly. "Discovered dead at eight forty-seven this morning."

"Anything else I need to know?" asked Spratt.

"A couple of points. First, the deceased is the nephew of crime boss Angel DeFablio, so I wanted someone good with the press in case the media decide to have a bonanza. Second, I'm giving you this job as a favor. You're not exactly first seed with the seventh floor at the moment. There are some people who want to see you take a fall--and I don't want that to happen."

"Is there a third point?"

"No one else is available."

"I preferred it when there were only two."

"Listen, Jack," Briggs went on. "You're a good officer, if a little sprung-loaded at times, and I want you on my team without any mishaps."

"Is this where I say thank you?"

"You do. Mop it up nice and neat and give me an initial report as soon as you can. Okay?"

Briggs nodded in the direction of the young lady who had been waiting patiently.

"Jack, I want you to meet Thurs--I mean, DS Mary Jones."

"Hello," said Jack.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," said the young woman.

"And you. Who are you working with?"

"Next--I mean *Jones* is your new detective sergeant," said Briggs, beginning to sweat for some inexplicable reason. "Transferred with an A-one record from Swindon."

"Basingstoke," corrected Mary.

"Sorry. *Basingstoke*."

"No offense to DS Jones, sir, but I was hoping for Butcher, Spooner or--"

"Not possible, Jack," said Briggs in the tone of voice that made arguing useless. "Well, I'm off. I'll leave you here with, er--"

"Jones."

"Yes, Jones, so you can get acquainted. Remember, I need that report as soon as possible. Got it?"

Jack did indeed get it and Briggs departed.

He shivered in the cold and looked at the young DS again.

"Mary Jones, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"What have you found out so far?"

She dug in her pocket for a notebook, couldn't find it, so counted the points off on her fingers instead.

"Deceased's name is Sonny DeFablio."

There was a pause. Jack didn't say anything, so Jones, now slightly startled, continued as though he had.

"Time of death? Too early to tell. Probably three A.M. last night, give or take an hour. We'll know more when we get the corpse. Gun? We'll know when . . ."

". . . Jack, are you okay?"

He had sat down wearily and was staring at the ground, head in hands.

I looked around, but both Dr. Singh, her assistants and the unnamed officers were busily getting on with their parts, unwilling, it seemed, to get embroiled--or perhaps they were just embarrassed.

"I can't do this anymore," muttered Jack.

"Sir," I persisted, trying to ad-lib, "do you want to see the body or can we remove it?"

"What's the use?" sobbed the crushed protagonist. "No one is reading us; it doesn't matter."

I placed my hand on his shoulder.

"I've *tried* to make it more interesting," he sobbed, "but nothing seems to work. My wife won't speak to me, my job's on the line, drugs are flooding into Reading and if I don't

make the narrative even remotely readable, then we all get demolished and there's nothing left at all except an empty hole on the bookshelf and the memory of a might-have-been in the head of the author."

"Your wife only left you because *all* loner, maverick detectives have domestic problems," I explained. "I'm sure she loves you really."

"No, no, she doesn't," he sobbed again. "All is lost. Don't you see? It's customary for detectives to drive unusual cars and I had a wonderful 1924 Delage-Talbot Supersport. The idea was stolen and replaced with that dreadful Austin Allegro. If any *scenes* get deleted, we'll really be stuffed."

He paused and looked up at me. "What's your name?"

"Thursday Next."

He perked up suddenly. "Thursday Next the Outlander Jurisdiction agent apprenticed to Miss Havisham Thursday Next?"

I nodded. News travels fast in the Well.

An excited gleam came into his eye. "I read about you in *The Word*. Tell me, would you have any way of finding out when the Book Inspectorate are due to read our story? I've lined up seven three-dimensional B-2 freelancers to come in and give the book a bit of an edge--just for an hour or so. With their help we might be able to hang on to it; all I need to know is the *when*."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Spratt," I sighed, "I'm new to all this; what exactly is the Council of Genres?"

"They look after fictional legislature, dramatic conventions, mainly--a representative from every genre sits on the Council--it is *they* who decide the conventions of storytelling, and it is *they*, through the Book Inspectorate, who decide whether an unpublished book is to be kept--or demolished."

"Oh," I replied, realizing that the BookWorld was governed by almost as many rules and regulations as my own, "then I can't help you."

"What about Text Grand Central? Do you know anyone there?"

TGC I *had* heard of: amongst other things, they monitored the books in the Great Library and passed any textual

problems on to us at Jurisdiction, who were purely a policing agency--but I knew no more than that. I shook my head again.

"Blast!" he muttered, staring at the ground. "I've applied to the C of G for a cross-genre makeover, but you might as well try and speak to the Great Panjandrum himself."

"Why don't you change the book from *within*?"

"Change without permission?" he replied, shocked at my suggestion. "That would mean rebellion. I want to get the C of G's attention, but not like that--we'd be crushed in less than a chapter!"

"But if the inspectorate haven't been round yet," I said slowly, "then how would they even know anything had changed?"

He thought about this for a moment. "Easier said than done--if I start to fool with the narrative, it might all collapse like a pack of cards!"

"Then start small, change *yourself* first. If that works, you can try to bend the plot slightly."

"Y-esss," said Jack slowly, "what did you have in mind?"

"Give up the booze."

"How did you know about my drink problem?"

"All maverick, loner detectives with domestic strife have drinking problems. Give up the liquor and go home to your wife."

"That's not how I've been written," replied Jack slowly. "I just can't do it--it would be going against type--the readers--!"

"Jack, there are no readers. And if you don't at least try what I suggest, there *never* will be any readers--or any Jack Spratt. But if things go well, you might even be in . . . a sequel."

"A sequel?" repeated Jack with a sort of dreamy look in his eyes. "You mean--a Jack Spratt *series*?"

"Who knows"--I shrugged--"maybe even one day--a boxed set."

His eyes gleamed and he stood up. "A boxed set," he whispered, staring into the middle distance. "It's up to me, isn't it?" he said in a slow voice.

"Yes. Change yourself, change the book--and soon, before it's too late--make the novel into something the Book Inspectorate will *want* to read."



"Okay," he said at last, "beginning with the next chapter. Instead of arguing with Briggs about letting a suspect go without charging them, I'll take my ex-wife out to lunch."

"No."

"No?"

"No," I affirmed. "Not tomorrow or next chapter or even next page or paragraph--you're going to change *now*."

"We can't! There are at least nine more pages while you and I discuss the state of the body with Dr. Singh and go through all that boring forensic stuff."

"Leave it to me. We'll jump back a paragraph or two. Ready?"

He nodded and we moved to the top of the previous page, just as Briggs was leaving.

**Jack did indeed get it and Briggs departed.**

**He shivered in the cold and looked at the young DS again.**

**"Mary Jones, eh?"**

**"Yes, sir."**

**"What have you found out so far?"**

**She dug in her pocket for a notebook, couldn't find it, so counted the points off on her fingers instead.**

**"Deceased's name is Sonny DeFablio."**

**"What else?"**

**"Your wife phoned."**

**"She . . . did?"**

**"Yes. Said it was important."**

**"I'll drop by this evening."**

**"She said it was *very* urgent," stressed Jones.**

**"Hold the fort for me, would you?"**

**"Certainly, sir."**

**Jack walked from the crime scene leaving Jones with Dr. Singh.**

**"Right," said Mary. "What have we got?"**

We ran the scene together, Dr. Singh telling me all the information that she was more used to relating to Jack. She went into a huge amount of detail regarding the time of death and a more-than-graphic explanation of how she thought it

had happened. Ballistics, trajectory, blood-splatter patterns, you name it. I was really quite glad when she finished and the chapter moved off to Jack's improvised meeting with his ex-wife.

As soon as we were done, Dr. Singh turned to me and said in an anxious tone, "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Not a clue."

"Me neither," replied the quasi pathologist. "You know that long speech I made just now about postmortem bruising, angles of bullet entry and discoloration of body tissues?"

"Yes?"

She leaned closer. "Didn't understand a word. Eight pages of technical dialogue and haven't the foggiest what I'm talking about. I only trained at Generic college as a mother figure in domestic potboilers. If I'd known I was to be drafted to *this*, I would have spent a few hours in a Cornwell. Do you have any clues as to what I'm actually meant to do?"

I rummaged in her bag and brought out a large thermometer.

"Try this."

"What do I do with it?"

I pointed.

"You're *kidding* me," replied Dr. Singh, aghast.

### 3.

## Three Witches, Multiple Choice and Sarcasm

*Jurisdiction* is the name given to the policing agency that works *inside* books. Under a remit from the Council of Genres and working with the intelligence-gathering capabilities of Text Grand Central, the Prose Resource Operatives at Jurisdiction comprise a mixed bag of characters, most drawn from the ranks of fiction but some, like Harris Tweed and myself, from the real world. Problems in fiction are noticed by "spotters" employed at Text Grand Central, and from there relayed to the Bellman, a ten-yearly elected figure who runs Jurisdiction under strict guidelines laid down by the Council of Genres. Jurisdiction has its own code of conduct, technical department, canteen and resident washerwoman.

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*The Jurisdiction Chronicles*

**D**R. SINGH DIDN'T waste the opportunity, and she gathered together several other trainee pathologists she knew from the Well. They all sat spellbound as I recounted the limited information I possessed. Exhausted, I managed to escape four hours later. It was evening when I finally got home. I opened the door to the flying boat and kicked off my shoes. Pickwick rushed up to greet me and tugged excitedly at my trouser leg. I followed her through to the living room and then had to wait while she remembered where she had left her egg. We finally found it rolled behind the hi-fi and I congratulated her, despite there being no change in its appearance.

I returned to the kitchen. ibb and obb had been studying *Mrs. Beeton's* all day, and ibb was attempting steak Diane with french fries. Landen used to cook that for me and I suddenly felt lonesome and small, so far from home I might well be on Pluto. obb was making the final touches to a fully decorated four-tier wedding cake.

"Hello, ibb," I said, "how's it going?"

"How's what going?" replied the Generic in that annoying literal way that they spoke. "And I'm obb."

"Sorry--obb."

"Why are you sorry? Have you done something?"

"Never mind."

I sat down at the table and opened a package that had arrived. It was from Miss Havisham and contained the Jurisfiction Standard Entrance Exam. I had joined Jurisfiction almost by accident--I had wanted to get Landen out of "The Raven" and getting involved with the agency seemed to be the best way to learn. But Jurisfiction had grown on me and I now felt strongly about maintaining the solidity of the written word. It was the same job I had undertaken at SpecOps, just from the other side. But it struck me that, on this occasion, Miss Havisham was wrong--I was not yet ready for full membership.

The hefty tome consisted of five hundred questions, nearly all of them multiple choice. I noticed that the exam was self-invigilating; as soon as I opened the book a clock in the top left-hand corner started to count down from two hours. The questions were mostly about literature, which I had no problem with. Jurisfiction law was trickier and I would probably need to consult with Miss Havisham. I made a start and ten minutes later was pondering question forty-six: *Which of the following poets never used the outlawed word majestic in their work?* when there was a knock at the door accompanied by a peal of thunder.

I closed the exam book and opened the door. On the jetty were three ugly, old crones dressed in filthy rags. They had bony features, rough and warty skin, and they launched into a well-rehearsed act as soon as the door opened.

"When shall we three meet again?" said the first witch. "In Thurber, Wodehouse, or in Greene?"

"When the hurly-burly's done," added the second, "when the story's thought and spun!"

There was a pause until the second witch nudged the third.

"That will be Eyre the set of sun," she said quickly.

"Where the place?"

"Within the text."

"There to meet with MsNext!"

They stopped talking and I stared, unsure of what I was meant to do.

"Thank you very much," I replied, but the first witch snorted disparagingly and wedged her foot in the door as I tried to close it.

"Prophecies, kind lady?" she asked as the other two cackled hideously.

"I really don't think so," I answered, pushing her foot away, "perhaps another time."

*"All hail, MsNext! Hail to thee, citizen of Swindon!"*

"Really, I'm sorry--and I'm out of change."

*"All hail, MsNext, hail to thee, full Jurisdiction agent, thou shalt be!"*

"If you don't go," I began, starting to get annoyed, "I'll--"

*"All hail, MsNext, thou shalt be Bellman thereafter!"*

"Sure I will. Go on, clear off, you imperfect speakers--bother someone else with your nonsense!"

"A shilling!" said the first. "And we shall tell you more--or less, as you please."

I closed the door despite their grumbling and went back to my multiple choice. I'd only answered question forty-nine: *Which of the following is not a gerund?* when there was another knock at the door.

"Blast!" I muttered, getting up and striking my ankle on the table leg. It was the three witches again.

"I thought I told you--"

"Sixpence, then," said the chief hag, putting out a bony hand.

"No," I replied firmly, rubbing my ankle, "I *never* buy anything at the door."

They all started up then: *"Thrice to thine and thrice to mine, and thrice again, to make up--"*

I shut the door again. I wasn't superstitious and had far more important things to worry about. I had just sat down again, sipped at my tea and answered the next question: *Who wrote Toad of Toad Hall?* when there was another rap at the door.

"Right," I said to myself, marching across the room, "I've had it with you three."

I pulled open the door and said, "Listen here, hag, I'm really not interested, nor ever will be in your . . . Oh."

I stared. Granny Next. If it had been Admiral Lord Nelson

himself I don't think I could have been more surprised.

"Gran!?!!" I exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing here?"

She was dressed in her usual outfit of spectacular blue gingham, from her dress to her overcoat and even her hat, shoes and bag.

I hugged her. She smelt of Bodmin for Women. She hugged me in return in that sort of fragile way that very elderly people do. And she *was* elderly--108, at the last count.

"I have come to look after you, young Thursday," she announced.

"Er--thank you, Gran," I replied, wondering quite how she had got here.

"You're going to have a baby and need attending to," she added grandly. "My suitcase is on the jetty and you're going to have to pay the taxi."

"Of course," I muttered, going outside and finding a yellow TransGenre Taxi.

"How much?" I asked the cabby.

"Seventeen and six."

"Oh, yes?" I replied sarcastically. "Took the long way round?"

"Trips to Horror, Bunyan and the Well cost double," said the cabbie. "Pay up or I'll make sure Jurisdiction hears about it. I had that Heathcliff in the back of my cab once."

"Really?" I replied, handing him a pound.

He patted his pockets. "Sorry, have you got anything smaller? I don't carry much change."

"Keep it," I told him as his footnoterphone muttered something about a party of ten wanting to get out of Florence in *The Decameron*. I got a receipt and he melted from view. I picked up Gran's suitcase and hauled it into the Sunderland.

"This is ibb and obb," I explained. "Generics billeted with me. The one on the left is ibb."

"I'm obb."

"Sorry. *That's* ibb and *that's* obb. This is my grandmother."

"Hello," said Granny Next, gazing at my two houseguests.

"You're very old," observed ibb.

"One hundred and eight," announced Gran proudly. "Do you two do anything but stare?"

"Not really," said ibb.

"Plock," said Pickwick, who had popped her head round the door, ruffled her feathers excitedly and rushed up to greet Gran, who always seemed to have a few spare marshmallows about her.

"What's it like being old?" asked ibb, who was peering closely at the soft, pink folds in Gran's skin.

"Death's adolescence," replied Gran. "But you know the worst part?"

ibb and obb shook their heads.

"I'm going to miss my funeral by three days."

"Gran!" I scolded. "You'll confuse them--they tend to take things literally."

It was too late.

"Miss your own funeral?" muttered ibb, thinking hard. "How is that possible?"

"Think about it, ibb," said obb. "If she lived three days longer, she'd be able to *speak* at her own funeral--get it?"

"Of course," said ibb, "stupid of me."

And they went into the kitchen, talking about Mrs. Beeton's book and the best way to deal with amorous liaisons between the scullery maid and the bootboy--it must have been an old edition.

"When's supper?" asked Gran, looking disdainfully at the interior of the flying boat. "I'm absolutely famished--but nothing tougher than suet, mind. The gnashers aren't what they were."

I delicately helped her out of her gingham coat and sat her down at the table. Steak diane would be like eating railway sleepers to her, so I started to make an omelette.

"Now, Gran," I said, cracking some eggs into a bowl, "I want you to tell me what you're doing here."

"I need to be here to remind you of things you might forget, young Thursday."

"Such as what?"

"Such as Landen. They eradicated my husband, too, and the one thing I needed was someone to help me through it, so that's what I'm here to do for you."

"I'm not going to forget him, Gran!"

"Yes," she agreed in a slightly peculiar way, "I'm here to make sure of it."

"That's the *why*," I persisted, "but what about the *how*?"

"I, too, used to do the occasional job for Jurisdiction in the old days. A long time ago, mind, but it was just one of many jobs that I did in my life--and not the strangest, either."

"What *was*?" I asked, knowing in my heart that I shouldn't really be asking.

"Well, I was God Emperor of the Universe, once," she answered in the same manner to which she might have admitted to going to the pictures, "and being a man for twenty-four hours was pretty weird."

"Yes, I expect it was."

ibb laid the table and we sat down to eat ten minutes later. As Gran sucked on her omelette I tried to make conversation with ibb and obb. The trouble was, neither of them had the requisite powers of social communication to assimilate anything from speech other than the bald facts it contained. I tried a joke I had heard from Bowden, my partner at SpecOps, about an octopus and a set of bagpipes. But when I delivered the punch line, they both stared at me.

"Why would the bagpipes be dressed in pajamas?" asked ibb.

"It wasn't," I replied, "it was the tartan. That's just what the octopus *thought* they were."

"I see," said obb, not seeing at all. "Would you mind going over it again?"

"That's it," I said resolutely, "you're going to have a personality if it kills me."

"Kill you?" inquired ibb in all seriousness. "Why would it kill you?"

I thought carefully. There had to be *somewhere* to begin. I clicked my fingers.

"Sarcasm," I said. "We'll start with that."

They both looked at me blankly.

"Well," I began, "sarcasm is closely related to irony and implies a twofold view--a literal meaning, yet a wholly *different* intention from what is said. For instance, if you were lying to me about who ate all the anchovies I left in the cupboard, and you *had* eaten them, you might say, 'It wasn't



me,' and I would say, '*Sure* it wasn't,' meaning I'm sure it *was* but in an ironic or sarcastic manner."

"What's an anchovy?" asked ibb.

"A small and very salty fish."

"I see," replied ibb. "Does sarcasm work with other things or is it only fish?"

"No, the stolen anchovies was only by way of an example. Now you try."

"An anchovy?"

"No, you try some sarcasm."

They continued to look at me blankly.

I sighed. "Like trying to nail jelly to the wall," I muttered under my breath.

"Plock," said Pickwick in her sleep as she gently keeled over. "Plocketty-plock."

"Sarcasm is better explained through humor," put in Gran, who had been watching my efforts with interest. "You know that Pickwick isn't too clever?"

Pickwick stirred in her sleep where she had fallen, resting on her head with her claws in the air.

"Yes, we know that," replied ibb and obb, who were nothing if not observant.

"Well, if I were to say that it is easier to get yeast to perform tricks than Pickwick, I'm using mild sarcasm to make a joke."

"Yeast?" queried ibb. "But yeast has no intelligence."

"*Exactly*," replied Gran. "So I am making a sarcastic observation that Pickwick has less brainpower than yeast. You try."

The Generic thought long and hard.

"So," said ibb slowly, "how about . . . Pickwick is so clever she sits on the TV and stares at the sofa?"

"It's a start," said Gran.

"And," added ibb, gaining confidence by the second, "if Pickwick went on *Mastermind*, she'd do best to choose 'dodo eggs' as her specialist subject."

obb was getting the hang of it, too. "If a thought crossed her mind, it would be the shortest journey on record."

"Pickwick has a brother at Oxford. In a jar."

"All right, that's enough sarcasm," I said quickly. "I know

Pickwick won't win 'Brain of BookWorld' but she's a loyal companion."

I looked across at Pickwick, who slid off the sofa and landed with a thump on the floor. She woke up and started plocking loudly at the sofa, coffee table, rug--in fact, anything close by--before calming down, climbing on top of her egg and falling asleep again.

"You did well, guys," I said. "Another time we'll tackle subtext."

ibb and obb went to their room soon afterwards, discussing how sarcasm was related to irony, and whether irony itself could be generated in laboratory conditions. Gran and I chatted about home. Mother was very well, it seemed, and Joffy and Wilbur and Orville were as mad as ever. Gran, conscious of my dealings with Yorrick Kaine in the past, reported that Kaine had returned soon after the episode with the Glatisant at Volescamper Towers, lost his seat in the House and been back at the helm of his newspaper and publishing company soon after. I knew he was fictional and a danger to my world but couldn't see what to do about it from here. We talked into the night about the BookWorld, Landen, eradications and having children. Gran had had three herself so gleefully told me all the stuff they don't tell you when you sign on the dotted line.

"Think of swollen ankles as trophies," she said, somewhat unhelpfully.

That night I put Gran in my room and slept in the bedroom under the flight deck. I washed, undressed and climbed into bed, weary after the day's work. I lay there, staring at the pattern of reflected light dancing on the ceiling and thought of my father, Emma Hamilton, Jack Spratt, Dream Topping and babies. I was meant to be here resting but the demolition problem of *Caversham Heights*, my adopted home, couldn't be ignored--I could have moved but I liked it here, and besides, I had done enough running away already. The arrival of Gran had been strange, but since much was odd here in the Well, weird had become commonplace. If things carried on like this, the dull and meaningless would become items of spectacular

interest.

## 4.

### Landen Parke-Laine

They say that no one really dies until you forget them, and in Landen's case it was especially true. Since Landen had been eradicated, I had discovered that I could bring him back to life in my memories and my dreams, and I had begun to look forward to falling asleep and returning to treasured moments that we could share, albeit only fleetingly.

Landen had lost a leg to a land mine and his best friend to a military blunder. The friend had been my brother Anton--and Landen had testified against him at the hearing that followed the disastrous "Charge of the Light Armored Brigade" in 1973. My brother was blamed for the debacle, Landen was honorably discharged and I was awarded the Crimea Star for gallantry. We didn't speak for ten years, and we were married two months ago. Some people say it was an unorthodox romance--but I never noticed myself.

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*The Jurisfiction Chronicles*

**T**HAT NIGHT, I went to the Crimea again. Not, you might think, the most obvious port of call in my sleep. The peninsula had been a constant source of anguish in my waking hours: a time of stress, of pain, and violent death. But the Crimea was where I'd met Landen, and where we'd fallen in love. The memories were more dear to me now because they had never happened, and for this reason the Crimea's sometimes painful recollections came back to me. I relaxed and was transported in the arms of Morpheus to the Black Sea peninsula, twelve years before.

No shots had been fired for ten years when I arrived on the peninsula in the May of 1973, although the conflict had been going for 120 years. I was attached to the Third Wessex Tank Light Armored Brigade as a driver--I was twenty-three years old and drove thirteen tons of armored vehicle under the command of Major Phelps, who was later to lose his lower arm and his mind during a badly timed charge into the massed Russian artillery. In my youthful naivete, I had thought the

Crimea was fun--a notion that was soon to change.

"Report to the vehicle pool at fourteen hundred hours," I was told one morning by our sergeant, a kindly yet brusque man by the name of Tozer. He would survive the charge but be lost in a training accident eight years later. I was at his funeral. He was a good man.

"Any idea what I'll be doing, Sarge?" I asked.

Sergeant Tozer shrugged. "Special duties. I was told to allocate someone intelligent--but they weren't available, so you'll have to do."

I laughed. "Thanks, Sarge."

I dreamed this scene more often these days and the reason was clear--it was the first time Landen and I spent any time together. My brother Anton was also serving out here and he had introduced us a few weeks before--but Anton did that a lot. Today I was to drive Landen in an armored scout car to an observation post overlooking a valley in which a buildup of Imperial Russian artillery had been reported. We referred to the incident as "our first date."

I arrived for duty and was told to sign for a Dingo scout car, a small, two-person armored vehicle with enough power to get out of trouble quickly--or into it, depending on one's level of competency. I duly picked up the scout car and waited for nearly an hour, standing in a tent with a lot of other drivers, talking and laughing, drinking tea and telling unlikely stories. It was a chilly day but I was glad I was doing this instead of daily orders, which generally meant cleaning up the camp and other tedious tasks.

"Corporal Next?" said an officer who poked his head into the tent. "Drop the tea--we're off!"

He wasn't handsome but he was *intriguing*, and unlike many of the officers, he seemed to have a certain relaxed manner about him.

I jumped to my feet. "Good morning, sir," I said, unsure of whether he remembered me. I needn't have worried. I didn't know it yet, but he had specifically asked Sergeant Tozer for me. He was intrigued, too, but fraternizing on active duty was a subtle art. The penalties could be severe.

I led him to where the Dingo was parked and climbed in. I

pressed the starter and the engine rumbled to life. Landen lowered himself into the commander's seat.

"Seen Anton recently?" he asked.

"He's up the coast for a few weeks," I told him.

"Ah, you made me fifty pounds when you won the ladies' boxing last weekend. I'm very grateful."

I smiled and thanked him but he wasn't paying me any attention--he was busy studying a map.

"We're going here, Corporal."

I studied the chart. It was the closest to the front lines I'd ever been. To my shame, I found the perceived danger somewhat intoxicating. Landen sensed it.

"It's not as wildly exciting as you might think, Next. I've been up there twenty times and was only shelled once."

"What was it like?"

"Disagreeably noisy. Take the road to Balaklava--I'll tell you when to turn right."

So we bumped off up the road, past a scene of such rural tranquillity that it was hard to imagine that two armies were facing each other not ten miles away with enough firepower to lay the whole peninsula to waste.

"Ever seen a Russian?" he asked as we passed military trucks supporting the frontline artillery batteries; their sole job was to lob a few shells towards the Russians--just to show we were still about.

"Never, sir."

"They look just like you and me, you know."

"You mean they don't wear big furry hats and have snow on their shoulders?"

The sarcasm wasn't wasted.

"Sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to patronize. How long have you been out here?"

"Two weeks."

"I've been here two *years*, but it might as well be two weeks. Take a right at the farmhouse just ahead."

I slowed down and cranked the wheel round to enter the dusty farm track. The springs on a Dingo are quite hard--it was a jarring ride along the track, which passed empty farm buildings, all bearing the scars of long-past battles. Old and

rusting armor and other war debris was lying abandoned in the countryside, reminders of just how long this static war had been going on. Rumor had it that in the middle of no-man's-land there were still artillery pieces dating from the nineteenth century. We stopped at a checkpoint, Landen showed his pass and we drove on, a soldier joining us up top "as a precaution." He had a second ammunition clip taped to the first in his weapon--always a sign of someone who expected trouble--and a dagger in his boot. He had only fourteen words and twenty-one minutes left before he was to die amongst a small spinney of trees that in happier times might have been a good place for a picnic. The bullet would enter below his left shoulder blade, deflect against his spine, go straight through his heart and exit three inches below his armpit, where it would lodge in the fuel gauge of the Dingo. He would die instantly and eighteen months later I would relate what had happened to his parents. His mother would cry and his father would thank me with a dry throat. But the soldier didn't know that. These were my memories, not his.

"Russian spotter plane!" hissed the doomed soldier.

Landen ordered me back to the trees. The soldier had eleven words left. He would be the first person I saw killed in the conflict but by no means the last. As a civvy you are protected from such unpleasanties, but in the forces it is commonplace--and you never get used to it.

I pulled the wheel over hard and doubled back towards the spinney as fast as I could. We halted under the protective cover of the trees and watched the small observation plane from the dappled shade. We didn't know it at the time, but an advance party of Russian commandos were pushing towards the lines in our direction. The observation post we were heading for had been overrun half an hour previously, and the commandos were being supported by the spotter plane we had seen--and behind them, twenty Russian battle tanks with infantry in support. The attack was to fail, of course, but only by virtue of the VHF wireless set carried in the Dingo. I would drive us out of there and Landen would call in an airstrike. That was the way it had happened. That's the way it had *always* happened. Brought together in the white heat and fear

of combat. But as we sat beneath the cover of the birch trees, huddled down in the scout car, the only sound the gentle thrum of the Dingo's engine, we knew nothing--and were only concerned that the spotter plane that wheeled above us would delay our arrival at the OP.

"What's it doing?" whispered Landen, shielding his eyes to get a better look.

"Looks like a Yak-12," replied the soldier.

Six words left and under a minute. I had been looking up with them but now glanced out of the hatch at the front of the scout car. My heart missed a beat as I saw a Russian run and jump into a natural hollow a hundred yards in front of the Dingo.

"Russki!" I gasped. "Hundred yards, twelve o'clock!"

I reached up to close the viewing hatch but Landen grabbed my wrist.

"Not yet!" he whispered. "Put her in gear."

I did as I was told as Landen and the soldier twisted around to look.

"What have you got?" hissed Landen.

"Five, maybe six," the soldier whispered back, "heading this way."

"Me, too," muttered Landen. "Go, Corporal, go!"

I revved the engine, dropped the clutch and the Dingo lunged forward. Almost instantaneously there was a rasp of machine-gun fire as the Russians opened up. To them, we were a surprise ruined. I heard the closer rattle of gunfire as our soldier replied along with the sporadic crack of a pistol that I knew was Landen. I didn't close the steel viewing hatch; I needed to be able to see as much as I could. The scout car bounced across the track and swerved before gathering speed with the metallic *spang* of small-arms fire hitting the armor plate. I felt a weight slump against my back and a bloodied arm fell into my vision.

"Keep going!" shouted the soldier. "And don't stop until I say!"

He let go another burst of fire, took out the spent clip, knocked the new magazine on his helmet, reloaded and fired again.



"That wasn't how it happened--!" I muttered aloud, the soldier having gone way over his allotted time and word count. I looked at the bloodied hand that had fallen against me. A feeling of dread began to gnaw slowly inside me--the fuel gauge was still intact--shouldn't it have been shattered when the soldier was shot? Then I realized. The soldier had survived and the *officer* was dead.

I sat bolt upright in the bed, covered in sweat and breathing hard. The strength of the memories had lessened with the years, but here was something new, something unexpected. I replayed the images in my head, watching the bloodstained hand fall again and again. It all felt so horribly real. But there was something, just there outside my grasp, something that I should know but didn't--a loss that I couldn't explain, an absence of some sort I couldn't place--

"Landen," said a soft voice in the darkness, "his name was *Landen*."

"Landen--!" I cried. "Yes, yes, his name was Landen."

"And he didn't die in the Crimea. The soldier did."

"No, no, I just remembered him dying!"

"You remembered *wrong*."

It was Gran, sitting beside me in her gingham nightie. She held my hand tightly and gazed at me through her spectacles, her gray hair adrift and hanging down in wispy strands. And with her words, I began to remember. Landen *had* survived--he must have done in order to call up the airstrike. But even now, awake, I could remember him lying dead beside me. It didn't make sense.

"He didn't die?"

"No."

I picked up the picture I had sketched of him from the bedside table.

"Did I ever see him again?" I asked, studying the unfamiliar face.

"Oh, yes," replied Gran. "Lots and lots. In fact, you married him."

"I did, didn't I?" I cried, tears coming to my eyes as the memories returned. "At the Blessed Lady of the Lobster in

Swindon! Were you there?"

"Yes, wouldn't have missed it for the world."

I was still confused. "What happened to him? Why isn't he with me now?"

"He was eradicated," replied Gran in a low voice, "by Lavoisier--and Goliath."

"I remember," I answered, the darkness in my mind made light as a curtain seemed to draw back and everything that had happened flooded in. "Jack Schitt. Goliath. They eradicated Landen to blackmail me. But I failed. I didn't get him back--and that's why I'm here." I stopped. "But, but, how could I possibly forget him? I was only thinking about him yesterday! What's happening to me?"

"It's Aornis, my dear," explained Gran, "she is a mnemonomorph. A memory-changer. Remember the trouble you had with her back home?"

I did, now she mentioned it. Gran's prompting broke the delicate veil of forgetfulness that cloaked Aornis's presence in my mind--and everything about Hades's little sister returned to me as though no longer hidden from my conscious memory. Aornis, who had sworn revenge for her brother's death at my hands; Aornis, who could manipulate memories as she chose; Aornis, who had nearly brought about a gooey Dream Topping global Armageddon. But Aornis wasn't from here. She lived in--

--the *real* world," I murmured out loud. "How can she be here, inside fiction? In *Caversham Heights* of all places?"

"She isn't," replied Gran. "Aornis is only in your mind. It isn't all of her, either--simply a mindworm--a sort of mental virus. She is resourceful, adaptable and spiteful; I know of no one else who can have an independent life within someone else's memory."

"So how do I get rid of her?"

"I have some experience of mnemonomorphs from my youth, but some things you have to defeat on your own. Stay on your toes and we will speak often and at length."

"Then this isn't over yet?"

"No," replied Gran sadly, shaking her head. "I wish it were. Be prepared for a shock, young Thursday--tell me Landen's

name in full."

"Don't be ridiculous!" I scoffed. "It's Landen Parke--"

I stopped as a cold fear welled up inside my chest. Surely I could remember my own husband's name? But try as I might, I could not. I looked at Gran.

"Yes, I do know," she replied, "but I'm not going to tell you. When you remember, you will know you have won."

## 5.

### The Well of Lost Plots

**Footnoterphone:** Although the idea of using footnotes as a communication medium was suggested by Dr. Faustus as far back as 1622, it wasn't until 1856 that the first practical footnoterphone was demonstrated. By 1895 an experimental version was built into *Hard Times*, and within the next three years most of Dickens was connected. The system was expanded rapidly, culminating in the first transgenre trunk line, opened with much fanfare in 1915 between Human Drama and Crime. The network has been expanded and improved ever since, but just recently the advent of mass junkfootnoterphones and the deregulation of news and entertainment channels has almost clogged the system. A mobilefootnoterphone network was introduced in 1985.

CAT FORMERLY KNOWN AS CHESHIRE,  
*Guide to the Great Library*

GRAN HAD GOT up early to make my breakfast and I found her asleep in the armchair with the kettle almost molten on the stove and Pickwick firmly ensnared in Gran's knitting. I made some coffee and cooked myself breakfast despite feeling nauseated. ibb and obb wandered in a little later and told me they had "slept like dead people" and were so hungry they could "eat a horse between two mattresses." They were just tucking into my breakfast when there was a rap at the door. It was Akrid Snell, one-half of the Perkins & Snell series of detective fiction. He was about forty, dressed in a sharp fawn suit with a matching fedora, and wore a luxuriant red mustache. He was one of Jurisfiction's lawyers and had been appointed to represent me; I was still facing a charge of Fiction Infraction after I changed the ending of *Jane Eyre*.

"Hello!" he said. "Welcome to the BookWorld!"

"Thank you. Are you well?"

"Just dandy! I got Oedipus off the incest charge--technicality, of course--he didn't know it was his mother at the time."

"Of course. And Fagin?"

"Still due to hang, I'm afraid," he said more sadly. "The

Gryphon is onto it--he'll find a way out, I'm sure."

He was looking around the shabby flying boat as he spoke.

"Well!" he said at last. "You do make some odd decisions. I've heard the latest Daphne Farquitt novel is being built just down the shelf--it's set in the eighteenth century and would be a lot more comfortable than this. Did you see the review of my latest book?"

He meant the book he was featured in, of course--Snell was fictional from the soles of his brogues to the crown of his fedora--and like most fictioneers, a little sensitive about it. I had read the review of *Wax Lyrical for Death* and it was pretty scathing; tact was of the essence in situations like these.

"No, I think I must have missed it."

"Oh! Well, it was really--really quite good, actually. I was glowingly praised as 'Snell is . . . very good . . . *well rounded* is . . . the phrase I would use,' and the book itself was described as 'surely the biggest piece of . . . 1986.' There's talk of a boxed set, too. Listen, I wanted to tell you that your Fiction Infraction trial will probably be next week. I tried to get another postponement but Hopkins is nothing if not tenacious; place and time to be decided upon."

"Should I be worried?" I asked, thinking about the last time I'd faced a court here in the BookWorld. It had been in Kafka's *The Trial* and it turned out predictably unpredictable.

"Not really," admitted Snell. "Our 'strong readership approval' defense should count for something--after all, you did actually do it, so just plain lying might not help so much after all. Listen," he went on without stopping for breath, "Miss Havisham asked me to introduce you to the wonders of the Well--she would have been here this morning but she's on a grammasite extermination course."

"We saw a grammasite in *Great Expectations*."

"So I heard. You can never be too careful as far as grammasites are concerned." He looked at ibb and obb, who were just finishing off my bacon and eggs. "Is this breakfast?"

I nodded.

"Fascinating! I've always wondered what a breakfast looked like. In our books we have twenty-three dinners, twelve lunches and eighteen afternoon teas--but no breakfasts." He

paused for a moment. "And why is orange jam called marmalade, do you suppose?"

I told him I didn't know and passed him a mug of coffee.

"Do you have any Generics living in your books?" I asked.

"A half dozen or so at any one time," he replied, spooning in some sugar and staring at ibb and obb, who, true to form, stared back. "Boring bunch until they develop a personality, then they can be quite fun. Trouble is, they have an annoying habit of assimilating themselves into a strong leading character, and it can spread amongst them like a rash. They used to be billeted en masse, but that all changed after we lodged six thousand Generics inside *Rebecca*. In under a month all but eight had become Mrs. Danvers. Listen, I don't suppose I could interest you in a couple of housekeepers, could I?"

"I don't think so," I replied, recalling Mrs. Danvers's slightly abrasive personality.

"Don't blame you," replied Snell with a laugh.

"So now it's only limited numbers per novel?"

"You learn fast. We had a similar problem with Merlins. We've had aged-male-bearded-wizard-mentor types coming out of our ears for years." He leaned closer. "Do you know how many Merlins the Well of Lost Plots has placed over the past fifty years?"

"Tell me."

"Nine thousand!" he breathed. "We even altered plotlines to include older male mentor figures! Do you think that was wrong?"

"I'm not sure," I said, slightly confused.

"At least the Merlin type is a popular character. Stick a new hat on him and he can appear pretty much anywhere. Try getting rid of thousands of Mrs. Danvers. There isn't a huge demand for creepy fifty-something housekeepers; even buy-two-get-one-free deals didn't help--we use them on anti-mispeeling duty, you know. A sort of army."

"What's it like?" I asked.

"How do you mean?"

"Being fictional."

"Ah!" replied Snell slowly. "Yes--fictional."

I realized too late that I had gone too far--it was how I

imagined a dog would feel if you brought up the question of distemper in polite conversation.

"I forgive your inquisitiveness, Miss Next, and since you are an Outlander, I will take no offense. If I were you, I shouldn't inquire too deeply about the past of fictioneers. We all aspire to be ourselves, an original character in a litany of fiction so vast that we know we cannot. After basic training at St. Tabularasa's, I progressed to the Dupin school for detectives; I went on field trips around the works of Hammett, Chandler and Sayers before attending a postgraduate course at the Agatha Christie finishing school. I would have liked to be an original, but I was born seventy years too late for that."

He stopped and paused for reflection. I was sorry to have raised the point. It can't be easy, being an amalgamation of all that has been written before.

"Right!" he said, finishing his coffee. "That's enough about me. Ready?"

I nodded.

"Then let's go."

So, taking my hand, he transported us both out of *Caversham Heights* and into the endless corridors of the Well of Lost Plots.

The Well was similar to the library as regards the fabric of the building--dark wood, thick carpet, tons of shelves--but here the similarity ended. Firstly, it was *noisy*. Tradesmen, artisans, technicians and Generics all walked about the broad corridors appearing and vanishing as they moved from book to book, building, changing and deleting to the author's wishes. Crates and packing cases lay scattered about the corridors, and people ate, slept and conducted their business in shops and small houses built in the manner of an untidy shantytown. Advertising billboards and posters were everywhere, promoting some form of goods or services unique to the business of writing.<sup>1</sup>

"I think I'm picking up junkfootnoterphone messages, Snell," I said above the hubbub. "Should I be worried?"

"You get them all the time down here. Ignore them--and never pass on chain footnotes."<sup>2</sup>

We were accosted by a stout man wearing a sandwich board

advertising bespoke plot devices "for the discerning wordsmith."

"No, thank you," yelled Snell, taking me by the arm and walking us to a quieter spot between Dr. Forthright's Chapter Ending Emporium and The Premier Mentor School.

"There are twenty-six floors down here in the Well," he told me, waving a hand towards the bustling crowd. "Most of them are chaotic factories of fictional prose like this one, but the twenty-sixth subbasement has an entrance to the Text Sea--we'll go down there and see them off-loading the scrawltrawlers one evening."

"What do they unload?"

"Words"--Snell smiled--"words, words and more words. The building blocks of fiction, the DNA of story."

"But I don't see any books being written," I observed, looking around.

He chuckled. "You Outlanders! Books may *look* like nothing more than words on a page, but they are actually an infinitely complex imaginotransference technology that translates odd, inky squiggles into pictures inside your head. Vast storycode engines at Text Grand Central throughput the images to the readers as they scan the text in the Outland. We're currently using Book Operating System V8.3--not for long, though--Text Grand Central want to upgrade the system."

"Someone mentioned Ultra Word™ on the news last night," I observed.

"Fancy-pants name. It's BOOK V9 to me and you. WordMaster Libris should be giving us a presentation shortly. UltraWord™ is being tested as we speak--if it's as good as they say it is, books will never be the same again!"

"Well," I sighed, trying to get my head around this idea, "I had always thought novels were just, well, *written*."

"*Write* is only the word we use to describe the recording process," replied Snell as we walked along. "The Well of Lost Plots is where we interface the writer's imagination with the characters and plots so that it will make sense in the reader's mind. After all, reading is arguably a far more creative and imaginative process than writing; when the reader creates emotion in their head, or the colors of the sky during the



setting sun, or the smell of a warm summer's breeze on their face, they should reserve as much praise for themselves as they do for the writer--perhaps more."

This was a new approach; I mulled the idea around in my head.

"Really?" I replied, slightly doubtfully.

"Of course!" Snell laughed. "*Surf pounding the shingle* wouldn't mean diddly unless you'd seen the waves cascade onto the foreshore, or felt the breakers tremble the beach beneath your feet, now would it?"

"I suppose not."

"Books"--Snell smiled--"are a kind of magic."

I thought about this for a moment and looked around at the chaotic fiction factory. My husband *was* or *is* a novelist--I had always wanted to know what went on inside his head, and this, I figured, was about the nearest I'd ever get.<sup>3</sup> We walked on, past a shop called A Minute Passed. It sold descriptive devices for marking the passage of time--this week they had a special on seasonal changes.

"What happens to the books which are unpublished?" I asked, wondering whether the characters in *Caversham Heights* really had so much to worry about.

"The failure rate is pretty high," admitted Snell, "and not just for reasons of dubious merit. *Bunyan's Bootscraper* by John McSquurd is one of the best books ever written, but it's never been out of the author's hands. Most of the dross, rejects or otherwise unpublished just languish down here in the Well until they are broken up for salvage. Others are so bad they are just demolished--the words are pulled from the pages and tossed into the Text Sea."

"All the characters are just recycled like waste cardboard or something?"

Snell paused and coughed politely. "I shouldn't waste too much sympathy on the one-dimensionals, Thursday. You'll run yourself ragged and there really isn't the time or resources to recharacterize them into anything more interesting."

"Mr. Snell, sir?"

It was a young man in an expensive suit, and he carried what looked like a very stained pillowcase with something

heavy in it about the size of a melon.

"Hello, Alfred!" said Snell, shaking the man's hand. "Thursday, this is Garcia--he has been supplying the Perkins and Snell series of books with intriguing plot devices for over ten years. Remember the unidentified torso found floating in the Humber in *Dead Among the Living*? Or the twenty-year-old corpse discovered with the bag of money bricked up in the spare room in *Requiem for a Safecracker*?"

"Of course!" I said, shaking the technician's hand. "Good, intriguing page-turning stuff. How do you do?"

"Well, thank you," replied Garcia, turning back to Snell after smiling politely. "I understand the next Perkins and Snell novel is in the pipeline and I have a little something that might interest you."

He held the bag open and we looked inside. It was a head. Or more importantly, a *severed* head.

"A head in a bag?" queried Snell with a frown, looking closer.

"Indeed," murmured Garcia proudly, "but not *any* old head in a bag. This one has an intriguing tattoo on the nape of the neck. You can discover it in a skip, outside your office, in a deceased suspect's deep freeze--the possibilities are endless."

Snell's eyes flashed excitedly. It was the sort of thing his next book needed after the critical savaging of *Wax Lyrical for Death*.

"How much?" he asked.

"Three hundred," ventured Garcia.

"Three hundred?!" exclaimed Snell. "I could buy a dozen head-in-a-bag plot devices with that and still have change for a missing Nazi gold consignment."

"No one's using the old 'missing Nazi gold consignment' plot device anymore." Garcia laughed. "If you don't want the head you can pass--I can sell heads pretty much anywhere I like. I just came to you first because we've done business before and I like you."

Snell thought for a moment. "A hundred and fifty."

"Two hundred."

"One seventy-five."

"Two hundred and I'll throw in a case of mistaken identity, a

pretty female double agent and a missing microfilm."

"Done!"

"Pleasure doing business with you," said Garcia as he handed over the head and took the money in return. "Give my regards to Mr. Perkins, won't you?"

He smiled, shook hands with us both and departed.

"Oh, boy!" exclaimed Snell, excited as a kid with a new bicycle. "Wait until Perkins sees this! Where do you think we should find it?"

I thought in all honesty that "head in a bag" plot devices were a bit lame, but being too polite to say so, I said instead, "I liked the deep-freezer idea, myself."

"Me, too!" Snell enthused as we passed a small shop whose painted headboard read: *Backstories built to order. No job too difficult. Painful childhoods a specialty.*

"Backstories?"

"Sure. Every character worth their salt has a backstory. Come on in and have a look."

We stooped and entered the low doorway. The interior was a workshop, small and smoky. A workbench in the middle of the room was liberally piled with glass retorts, test tubes and other chemical apparatus; the walls, I noticed, were lined with shelves that held tightly stoppered bottles containing small amounts of colorful liquids, all with labels describing varying styles of backstory, from one named *Idyllic childhood* to another entitled *Valiant war record*.

"This one's nearly empty," I observed, pointing to a large bottle with *Misguided feelings of guilt over the death of a loved one/partner ten years previously* written on the label.

"Yes," said a small man in a corduroy suit so lumpy it looked as though the tailor were still inside doing alterations, "that one's been quite popular recently. Some are hardly used at all. Look above you."

I looked up at the full bottles gathering dust on the shelves above. One was labeled *Studied squid in Sri Lanka* and another, *Apprentice Welsh mole catcher*.

"So what can I do for you?" inquired the backstoryist, gazing at us happily and rubbing his hands. "Something for the lady? Ill treatment at the hands of sadistic stepsisters? Traumatic

incident with a wild animal? No? We've got a deal this week on unhappy love affairs; buy one and you get a younger brother with a drug problem at no extra charge."

Snell showed the merchant his Jurisfiction badge.

"Business call, Mr. Grnksghty--this is apprentice Next."

"Ah!" he said, deflating slightly. "The law."

"Mr. Grnksghty here used to write backstories for the Brontes and Thomas Hardy," explained Snell, placing his bag on the floor and sitting on a table edge.

"Ah, yes!" replied the man, gazing at me from over the top of a pair of half-moon spectacles. "But that was a long time ago. Charlotte Bronte, now she *was* a writer. A lot of good work for her, some of it barely used--"

"Yes, speaking," interrupted Snell, staring vacantly at the array of glassware on the table. "I'm with Thursday down in the Well. . . . What's up?"

He noticed us both staring at him and explained, "Footnoterphone. It's Miss Havisham."

"It's so rude," muttered Mr. Grnksghty. "Why can't he go outside if he wants to talk on one of those things?"

"It's probably nothing but I'll go and have a look," said Snell, staring into space. He turned to look at us, saw Mr. Grnksghty glaring at him and waved absently before going outside the shop, still talking.

"Where were we, young lady?"

"You were talking about Charlotte Bronte ordering backstories and then not using them?"

"Oh, yes." The man smiled, delicately turning a tap on the apparatus and watching a small drip of an oily colored liquid fall into a flask. "I made the most wonderful backstory for both Edward and Bertha Rochester, but do you know she only used a very small part of it?"

"That must have been very disappointing."

"It was," he sighed. "I am an artist, not a technician. But it didn't matter. I sold it lock, stock and barrel a few years back to *The Wide Sargasso Sea*. Harry Flashman from *Tom Brown's Schooldays* went the same way. I had Mr. Pickwick's backstory for years but couldn't make a sale--I donated it to the Jurisfiction museum."

"What do you make a backstory out of, Mr. Grnksghty?"

"Treacle, mainly," he replied, shaking the flask and watching the oily substance change to a gas, "and memories. *Lots* of memories. In fact, the treacle is really only there as a binding agent. Tell me, what do you think of this upgrade to Ultra WordTM?"

"I have yet to hear about it properly," I admitted.

"I particularly like the idea of ReadZipTM," mused the small man, adding a drop of red liquid and watching the result with great interest. "They say they will be able to crush *War and Peace* into eighty-six words and still retain the scope and grandeur of the original."

"Seeing is believing."

"Not down here," Mr. Grnksghty corrected me. "Down here, *reading* is believing."

There was a pause as I took this in.

"Mr. Grnksghty?"

"Yes?"

"How do you pronounce your name?"

At that moment Snell strolled back in.

"That was Miss Havisham," he announced, retrieving his head. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Grnksghty--come on, we're off."

Snell led me down the corridor past more shops and traders until we arrived at the bronze-and-wood elevators. The doors opened and several small street urchins ran out holding cleft sticks with a small scrap of paper wedged in them.

"Ideas on their way to the books-in-progress," explained Snell as we stepped into the elevator. "Trading must have just started. You'll find the Idea Sales and Loan department on the seventeenth floor."

The ornate elevator plunged rapidly downwards.

"Are you still being bothered by junkfootnoterphones?"

"A little."<sup>4</sup>

"You'll get used to ignoring them."

The bell sounded and the elevator doors slid open, bringing with it a chill wind. It was darker than the floor we had just visited and several disreputable-looking characters stared at us

from the shadows. I moved to get out but Snell stopped me. He looked about and whispered, "This is the twenty-second subbasement. The roughest place in the Well. A haven for cutthroats, bounty hunters, murderers, thieves, cheats, shape-shifters, scene-stealers, brigands and plagiarists."

"We don't tolerate these sort of places back home," I murmured.

"We *encourage* them here," explained Snell. "Fiction wouldn't be much fun without its fair share of scoundrels, and they have to live somewhere."

I could feel the menace as soon as we stepped from the elevator. Low mutters were exchanged amongst several hooded figures who stood close by, their faces obscured by the shadows, their hands bony and white. We walked past two large cats with eyes that seemed to dance with fire; they stared at us hungrily and licked their lips.

"Dinner," said one, looking us both up and down. "Shall we eat them together or one by one?"

"One by one," said the second cat, who was slightly bigger and a good deal more fearsome, "but we better wait until Big Martin gets here."

"Oh, yeah," said the first cat, retracting his claws quickly, "so we'd better."

Snell had ignored the two cats completely; he glanced at his watch and said, "We're going to the Slaughtered Lamb to visit a contact of mine. Someone has been cobbling together plot devices from half-damaged units that should have been condemned. It's not only illegal--it's dangerous. The last thing anyone needs is a 'Do we cut the red wire or the blue wire?' plot device going off an hour too early and ruining the suspense--how many stories have you read where the bomb is defused with an hour to go?"

"Not many, I suppose."

"You suppose right. We're here."

The gloomy interior was shabby and smelt of beer. Three ceiling fans stirred the smoke-filled atmosphere, and a band was playing a melancholy tune in one corner. The dark walls were spaced with individual booths where somberness was an abundant commodity; the bar in the center seemed to be the

lightest place in the room and gathered there, like moths to a light, were an odd collection of people and creatures, all chatting and talking in low voices. The atmosphere in the room was so thick with dramatic cliches you could have cut it with a knife.

"See over there?" said Snell, indicating two men who were deep in conversation.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Hyde talking to Blofeld. In the next booth are Von Stalhein and Wackford Squeers. The tall guy in the cloak is Emperor Zhark, tyrannical ruler of the known galaxy and star of the Zharkian Empire series of SF books. The one with the spines is Mrs. Tiggy-winkle--they'll be on a training assignment, just like us."

"Mrs. Tiggy-winkle is an apprentice?" I asked incredulously, staring at the large hedgehog who was holding a basket of laundry and sipping delicately at a sherry.

"No; Zhark is the apprentice--Tiggy's a full agent. She deals with children's fiction, runs the Hedgepigs Society--and does our washing."

"Hedgepigs Society?" I echoed. "What does *that* do?"

"They advance hedgehogs in all branches of literature. Mrs. Tiggy-winkle was the first to get star billing and she's used her position to further the lot of her species; she's got references into Kipling, Carroll, Aesop and four mentions in Shakespeare. She's also good with really stubborn stains--and never singes the cuffs."

"*Tempest, Midsummer Night's Dream, Macbeth*," I muttered, counting them off on my fingers. "Where's the fourth?"

"*Henry VI*, part one, act four, scene one: 'Hedge-born Swaine.' "

"I always thought that was an insult, not a hedgehog. *Swaine* can be a *country lad* just as easily as a *pig*--perhaps more so."

"Well," sighed Snell, "we've given her the benefit of the doubt--it helps with the indignity of being used as a croquet ball in *Alice*. Don't mention Tolstoy or Berlin when she's about, either--conversation with Tiggy is easier when you avoid talk of theoretical sociological divisions and stick to the question of washing temperatures for woollens."

"I'll remember that," I murmured. "The bar doesn't look so bad with all those pot plants scattered around, does it?"

Snell sighed audibly. "They're Triffids, Thursday. The big blobby thing practicing golf swings with the Jabberwock is a Krell, and that rhino over there is Rataxis. Arrest anyone who tries to sell you soma tablets, don't buy any Bottle Imps no matter how good the bargain and above all *don't look at Medusa*. If Big Martin or the Questing Beast turn up, run like hell. Get me a drink and I'll see you back here in five minutes."

"Right."

He departed into the gloom and I was left feeling a bit ill at ease. I made my way to the bar and ordered two drinks. On the other side of the bar a third cat had joined the two I had previously seen. The newcomer pointed to me but the others shook their heads and whispered something in his ear. I turned the other way and jumped in surprise as I came face-to-face with a curious creature that looked as though it had escaped from a bad science fiction novel--it was all tentacles and eyes. A smile may have flicked across my face because the creature said in a harsh tone:

**"What's the problem, never seen a Thraal before?"**

I didn't understand; it sounded like a form of **Courier bold**, but I wasn't sure so said nothing, hoping to brazen it out.

**"Hey!"** it said. **"I'm talking to you, two-eyes."**

The altercation had attracted another man, who looked like the product of some bizarre genetic experiment gone hopelessly wrong.

"He says he doesn't like you."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't like you, either," said the man in a threatening tone, adding, as if I needed proof, "I have the death sentence in seven genres."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I assured him, but this didn't seem to work.

*"You're the one who'll be sorry!"*

"Come, come, Nigel," said a voice I recognized. "Let me buy you a drink."



This wasn't to the genetic experiment's liking for he moved quickly to his weapon; there was a sudden blur of movement and in an instant I had my automatic pressed hard against his head--Nigel's gun was still in his shoulder holster. The bar went quiet.

"You're quick, girly," said Nigel. "I respect that."

"She's with me," said the newcomer. "Let's all just calm down."

I lowered my gun and replaced the safety. Nigel nodded respectfully and returned to his place at the bar with the odd-looking alien.

"Are you all right?"

It was Harris Tweed. He was a fellow Jurisdiction agent and Outlander, just like me. The last time I had seen him was three days ago in Lord Volescamper's library, when we had flushed out the renegade fictioneer Yorrick Kaine after he had invoked the Questing Beast to destroy us. Tweed had been carried off by the exuberant bark of a bookhound and I had not seen him since.

"Thanks for that, Tweed," I said. "What did the alien thing want?"

"He was a Thraal, Thursday--speaking in **Courier bold**, the traditional language of the Well. Thraals are not only all eyes and tentacles, but mostly mouth, too--he'd not have harmed you. Nigel, on the other hand, has been known to go a step too far on occasion--what are you doing alone in the twenty-second subbasement anyway?"

"I'm not alone. Havisham's busy so Snell's showing me around."

"Ah," replied Tweed, looking about, "does this mean you're taking your entrance exams?"

"Third of the way through the written already. Did you track down Kaine?"

"No. We went all the way to London, where we lost the scent. Bookhounds don't work so well in the Outland, and besides--we have to get special permission to pursue PageRunners into the real world."

"What does the Bellman say about that?"

"He's for it, of course," replied Tweed, "but the launch of

Ultra WordTM has dominated the Council of Genres' discussion time. We'll get round to Kaine in due course."

I was glad of this; Kaine wasn't only an escapee from fiction but a dangerous right-wing politician back home. I would be only too happy to see him back inside whatever book he'd escaped from--permanently.

At that moment Snell returned and nodded a greeting to Tweed, who returned it politely.

"Good morning, Mr. Tweed," said Snell, "will you join us for a drink?"

"Sadly, I cannot," replied Tweed. "I'll see you tomorrow morning at roll call, yes?"

"Odd sort of fellow," remarked Snell as soon as Tweed had left. "What was he doing here?"

I handed Snell his drink and we sat down in an empty booth. It was near the three cats and they stared at us hungrily while consulting a large recipe book.

"I had a bit of trouble at the bar and Tweed stepped in to help."

"Good thing, too. Ever see one of these?"

He rolled a small globe across the table and I picked it up. It was a little like a Christmas decoration but a lot more sturdy. A small legend complete with a bar code and ID number was printed on the side.

" 'Suddenly, a Shot Rang Out! FAD/167945,' " I read aloud. "What does it mean?"

"It's a stolen freeze-dried plot device. Crack it open and *pow!*--the story goes off at a tangent."

"How do we know it's stolen?"

"It doesn't have a Council of Genres seal of approval. Without one, these things are worthless. Log it as evidence when you get back to the office."

He took a sip of his drink, coughed and stared into the glass. "W-what is this?"

"I'm not sure but mine is just as bad."

"Not possible. Hello, Emperor, have you met Thursday Next? Thursday, this is Emperor Zhark."

A tall man swathed in a high-collared cloak was standing next to our table. He had a pale complexion, high cheekbones

and a small and precise goatee. He looked at me with cold, dark eyes and raised an eyebrow imperiously.

"Greetings," he intoned indifferently. "You must send my regards to Miss Havisham. Snell, how is my defense looking?"

"Not too good, Your Mercilessness," he replied. "Annihilating all the planets in the Cygnus cluster might not have been a very good move."

"It's those bloody Rambosians," Zhark said angrily. "They threatened my empire. If I didn't destroy entire star systems, no one would have any respect for me; it's for the good of galactic peace, you know--*stability*, and anyway, what's the point in possessing a devastatingly destructive death ray if you can't use it?"

"Well, I should keep that to yourself. Can't you claim you were cleaning it when it went off or something?"

"I suppose," said Zhark grudgingly. "Is there a head in that bag?"

"Yes, do you want to have a look?"

"No, thanks. Special offer, yes?"

"What?"

"Special offer. You know, clearance sale. How much did you pay for it?"

"Only a . . . hundred," Snell said, glancing at me. "Less than that, actually."

"You were done." Zhark laughed. "They're forty a half dozen at CrimeScene, Inc.--with double stamps, too."

Snell's face flushed with anger and he jumped up.

"The little scumbag!" he spat. "I'll have *him* in a bag when I see him again!" He turned to me. "Will you be all right getting out on your own?"

"Sure."

"Good," he replied through gritted teeth. "See you later!"

"Hold it!" I said, but it was too late. He had vanished.

"Problems?" asked Zhark.

"No," I replied slowly, holding up the dirty pillowcase, "he just forgot his head--and careful, Emperor, there's a Triffid creeping up behind you."

Zhark turned to face the Triffid, who stopped, thought better of an attack and rejoined his friends, who were cooling their

roots at the bar.

Zhark departed and I looked around. At the next table a *fourth* cat had joined the other three. It was bigger than the others and considerably more battle-scarred--it had only one eye and both ears had large bites taken out of them. They all licked their lips as the newest cat said in a low voice, "Shall we eat her?"

"Not yet," replied the first cat, "we're waiting for Big Martin."

They returned to their drinks but never took their eyes off me. I could imagine how a mouse felt. After ten minutes I decided that I was not going to be intimidated by outsize house pets and got up to leave, taking Snell's head with me. The cats got up and followed me out, down the dingy corridor. Here the shops sold weapons, dastardly plans for world domination and fresh ideas for murder, revenge, extortion and other general mayhem. Generics, I noticed, could be trained in the dark art of being an accomplished evildoer as easily as any other profession. The cats yowled excitedly and I quickened my step only to stumble into a clearing amidst the shantytown of wooden buildings. The reason for the clearing was obvious. Sitting atop an old packing case was another cat. But this one was different. No oversize house cat, this beast was four times the size of a tiger and it stared at me with ill-disguised malevolence. Its claws were extended and fangs at the ready, glistening slightly with hungry anticipation. I stopped and looked behind me to where the four other cats had lined up and were staring at me expectantly, tails gently lashing the air. A quick glance around the corridor proved that there was no one near who might offer me any assistance; indeed, most of the bystanders seemed to be getting ready for something of a show.

I pulled out my automatic as one of the cats bounded up to the newcomer and said, "Can we eat her now, please?"

The large cat placed one of its claws in the packing case and drew it through the wood like a razor-sharp chisel cutting through soft clay; it stared at me with huge green eyes and said in a deep, rumbling voice:

"Shouldn't we wait until Big Martin gets here?"

"Yes," sighed the smaller cat with a strong air of disappointment, "perhaps we should."

Suddenly, the big cat pricked up his ears and jumped from his box into the shadows; I pointed my gun but it wasn't attacking--the overgrown tiger was departing in a panic. The other cats quickly left the scene and pretty soon the bystanders had gone, too. Within a few moments I was completely alone in the corridor, with nothing to keep me company but the rapid thumping of my own heart, and a head in a bag.

## 6.

### Night of the Grammasites

**Grammasite:** Generic term for a parasitic life-form that lives inside books and feeds on grammar. Technically known as Gerunds or Ingers, they were an early attempt to transform nouns (which were plentiful) into verbs (which at the time were not) by simply attaching an *ing*. A dismal failure at verb resource management, they escaped from captivity and now roam freely in the subbasements. Although they are thankfully quite rare in the library itself, isolated pockets of grammasites are still found from time to time and dealt with mercilessly.

CAT FORMERLY KNOWN AS CHESHIRE,  
*Guide to the Great Library*

I TURNED AND WALKED quickly towards the elevators, a strong feeling of impending oddness raising the hair on the back of my neck. I pressed the call button but nothing happened. I quickly dashed across the corridor and tried the second bank of elevators, but with no more success. I was just thinking of running to the stairwell when I heard a noise. It was a distant, low moan that was quite unlike any other sort of low moan that I had ever heard, nor would ever want to hear again. I put down the head in a bag as my palms grew sweaty, and although I *told* myself I was calm, I pressed the call button several more times and reached for my automatic as a shape hove into view from the depths of the corridor. It was flying close to the bookshelves and was something like a bat, something like a lizard and something like a vulture. It was covered in patchy gray fur and wearing stripy socks and a brightly colored waistcoat of questionable taste. I had seen this sort of thing before; it was a grammasite, and although dissimilar to the adjectivore I had seen in *Great Expectations*, I imagined it could do just as much harm--it was little wonder that the residents of the Well had locked themselves away. The grammasite swept past in a flash without noticing me and was soon gone with a rumble like distant artillery. I relaxed slightly, expecting to see the Well spring back into life, but

nothing stirred. Far away in the distance, beyond the Slaughtered Lamb, an excited burble reached my straining ears. I pressed the call button again as the noise grew louder and a slight breeze drafted against my face, like the oily zephyr that precedes an underground train. I shuddered. Where I came from, a Browning automatic spoke volumes, but how it would work on a grammar-sucking parasite, I had no idea--and I didn't think this would be a good time to find out. I was preparing myself to run when there was a melodious *bing*, the call button light came on and one of the elevator pointers started to move slowly towards my floor. I ran across and leaned with my back against the doors, releasing the safety on my automatic as the wind and noise increased. By the time the elevator was four floors away, the first grammasites had arrived. They looked around the corridor as they flew, sniffing at books with their long snouts and giving off excited squeaks. This was the advance guard. A few seconds later the main flock arrived with a deafening roar. One or two of them poked at books until they fell off the shelves, while other grammasites fell upon the unfinished manuscripts with an excited cry. There was a scuffle as a character burst from a page, only to be impaled by a grammasite, who reduced the unfortunate wretch to a few explanatory phrases, which were then eaten by scavengers waiting on the sidelines. I had seen enough. I opened fire and got three of them straightaway, who were devoured in turn by the same scavengers--clearly there was little honor or sense of loss amongst grammasites; their compatriots merely shuffled into the gaps left by their fallen comrades. I picked off two who were scrabbling at the bookcases attempting to dislodge more books and then turned away to reload. As I did, another eerie silence filled the corridor. I released the slide on my automatic and looked up. About a hundred or so grammasites were staring at me with their small black eyes, and it wasn't a look that I'd describe as anywhere near friendly. I sighed. What a way to go. I could see my headstone now:

Thursday Next  
1950-1986

SpecOps agent & beloved wife  
to someone who doesn't exist  
*Died for no adequately explained reason  
in an abstract place by an abstract foe.*

I raised my gun and the grammasites shuffled slightly, as though deciding amongst themselves who would be sacrificed for them to overpower me. I pointed the gun at whichever one started to move, hoping to postpone the inevitable. The one who seemed to be the leader--he had the brightest-colored waistcoat, I noted--took a step forward and I pointed my gun at him as another grammasite seized the opportunity and made a sudden leap towards me, its sharpened beak heading straight for my chest. I whirled around in time to see its small black eyes twinkle with a thousand well-digested verbs when a hand on my shoulder pulled me roughly backwards into the elevator. The grammasite, carried on by its own momentum, buried its beak into the wood surround. I reached to thump the close button, but my wrist was deftly caught by my as yet unseen savior.

"We *never* run from grammasites."

It was a scolding tone of voice that I knew only too well. Miss Havisham. Dressed in her rotting wedding dress and veil, she stared at me with despair. I think I was one of the worst apprentices she had ever trained--or that was the way she made me feel, at any rate.

"We have nothing to fear except fear itself," she intoned, whipping out her pocket derringer and dispatching two grammasites who made a rush at the elevator's open door. "I seem to spend my waking hours extricating you from the soup, my girl!"

The grammasites were slowly advancing on us; they were now at least three hundred strong and others were joining them. We were heavily outnumbered.

"I'm sorry," I replied quickly, curtsying just in case as I loosed off another shot, "but don't you think we should be departing?"

"I fear only the Questing Beast," announced Havisham imperiously. "The Questing Beast, Big Martin . . . and



semolina."

She shot another grammasite with a particularly fruity waistcoat and carried on talking. "If you had troubled to do some homework, you would know that these are Verbisoids and probably the easiest grammasite to vanquish of them all."

And almost without pausing for breath, Miss Havisham launched into a croaky and out-of-tune rendition of William Blake's "Jerusalem." The grammasites stopped abruptly and stared at one another. By the time I had joined her at the "holy Lamb of God" line, they had begun to back away in fright. We sang louder, Miss Havisham and I, and by "dark Satanic mills" they had started to take flight; by the time we had got to "Bring me my chariot of fire," they had departed completely.

"Quick!" said Miss Havisham. "Grab the waistcoats--there's a bounty on each one."

We stripped the waistcoats from the fallen grammasites; it was not a pleasant job--the corpses smelt so strongly of ink that it made me cough. The carcasses would be taken away by a verminator, who would boil down the bodies and distill off any verbs he could. In the Well, nothing is wasted.

"What were the smaller ones?"

"I forget," replied Havisham, gathering up the waistcoats. "Here, you're going to need this. Study it well if you want to pass your exams."

She handed me my TravelBook, the one that Goliath had taken. Within its pages were almost all the tips and equipment I needed for travel within the BookWorld.

"How did you manage that?"

Miss Havisham didn't answer. She was a bit like a strict parent, your worst teacher and a newly appointed South American dictator all rolled into one--which wasn't to say I didn't like her or respect her. It was just that I felt I was still nine whenever she spoke to me.

"Why do grammasites wear stripy socks?" I ventured, tying up the waistcoats with some string that Havisham had given me.

"Probably because spotted ones are out of fashion," she replied with a shrug, reloading her pistol. "What's in the bag?"

"Oh, some, er, shopping of Snell's."

I tried to change the subject. I didn't suppose carrying around unlicensed plot devices was something Havisham would approve of--even if they were Snell's.

"So why did we, um, sing 'Jerusalem' to get rid of them?"

"As I said, those grammasites were Verbisoids," she replied without looking up, "and a Verbisoid, in common with many language students, hates and fears *irregular* verbs--they far prefer consuming regular verbs with the *ed* word ending. Strong irregulars such as *to sing* with their internal vowel changes--we will *sing*--we *sang*--we have *sung*--tend to scramble their tiny minds."

"Any irregular verb frightens them off?" I asked with interest.

"Pretty much; but some irregulars are more easy to demonstrate than others--we could *cut*, I suppose, or even *be*, but then the proceedings change into something akin to a desperate game of charades--far easier to just sing and have done with it."

"What about if we were *to go*?" I ventured, thinking practically for once. "There can't be anything more irregular than *go*, *went*, *gone*, can there?"

"Because," replied Miss Havisham, her patience eroding by the second, "they might misconstrue it as *walked*--note the *ed* ending?"

"Not if we *ran*," I added, not wanting to let this go. "That's irregular, too."

Miss Havisham stared at me icily. "Of course we could. But *ran* might be seen in the eyes of a hungry Verbisoid to be either trotted, galloped, raced, rushed, hurried, hastened, sprinted and even departed."

"Ah," I said, realizing that trying to catch Miss Havisham out was about as likely as nailing Banquo's ghost to a coffee table, "yes, it might, mightn't it?"

"Look," said Miss Havisham, softening slightly, "if running away killed grammasites, there wouldn't be a single one left. Stick to 'Jerusalem' and you won't go far wrong--just don't try it with adjectivores or the parataxis; they'd probably join in--and then eat you."

She snorted, picked up the bundle of waistcoats and pulled

me towards the elevator, which had just reopened. It was clear that the twenty-second subbasement wasn't a place she liked to be. I couldn't say I blamed her.

She relaxed visibly as we rose from the subbasements and into the more ordered nature of the library itself. We weren't alone in the elevator. With us was a large Painted Jaguar and her son, who had a paddy-paw full of prickles and was complaining bitterly that he had been tricked by a hedgehog and a tortoise, who had both escaped. The Mother Jaguar shook her head sadly and looked at us both with an exasperated air before addressing her son:

"Son, son," she said, ever so many times, graciously waving her tail, "what have you been doing that you shouldn't have?"

"So," said Miss Havisham as the elevator moved off, "how are you getting along in that frightful *Caversham Heights* book?"

"Well, thank you, Miss Havisham," I muttered, "the characters in it are worried that their book will be demolished from under their feet."

"With good reason I expect. Hundreds of books like *Heights* are demolished every day. If you stopped to waste any sympathy, you'd go nuts--so don't. It's man eat man in the Well. I'd keep yourself to yourself and don't make too many friends--they have a habit of dying just when you get to like them. It always happens that way. It's a narrative thing."

"*Heights* isn't a bad place to live," I ventured, hoping to elicit a bit of compassion.

"Doubtless," she murmured, staring at the floor indicator. "I remember when I was in the Well, when they were building *Great Expectations*. I thought I was the luckiest girl in the world when they told me I would be working with Charles Dickens. Top of my class at Generic College and, without seeming immodest, something of a beauty. I thought I would make an admirable young Estella--both refined and beautiful, haughty and proud, yet ultimately overcoming the overbearing crabbiness of her cantankerous benefactor to find true love."

"So . . . what happened?"

"I wasn't tall enough."

"Tall enough? For a book? Isn't that like having the wrong hair color for the wireless?"

"They gave the part to a little strumpet who was on salvage from a demolished Thackeray. Little cow. It's no wonder I treat her so rotten--the part should have been mine!"

She fell into silence.

"Let me get this straight," said the Painted Jaguar, who was having a bit of trouble telling the difference between a hedgehog and a tortoise. "If it's slow and solid, I drop him in the water and then scoop him out of his shell--"

"Son, son!" said his mother, ever so many times, graciously waving her tail. "Now attend to me and remember what I say. A hedgehog curls himself up into a ball and his prickles stick out every way--"

"Did you get the Jurisfiction exam papers I sent you?" asked Miss Havisham. "I've got your practical booked for the day after tomorrow."

"Oh!" I said with quite the wrong tone in my voice.

"Problems?" she asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

"No, ma'am--I just feel a bit unprepared--I think I might make a pig's ear of it."

"I disagree. I *know* you'll make a pig's ear of it. But wheels within wheels--all I ask is you don't make a fool of yourself or lose your life. Now that *would* be awkward."

"So," said the Painted Jaguar, rubbing his head, "if it can roll itself into a ball it must be a tortoise and--"

"Ahhh!" cried the Mother Jaguar, lashing her tail angrily. "Completely wrong. Miss Havisham, what am I to do with this boy?"

"I have no idea," she replied. "All men are dolts, from where I'm standing."

The Painted Jaguar looked crestfallen and stared at the floor.

"Can I make a suggestion?" I asked.

"Anything!" replied the Mother Jaguar.

"If you make a rhyme out of it, he *might* be able to remember."

The Mother Jaguar sighed. "It won't help. Yesterday he

forgot he was a Painted Jaguar. He makes my spots ache, really he does."

"How about this?" I said, making up a rhyme on the spot:

Can't curl, but can swim--  
Slow-Solid, that's him!  
Curls up, but can't swim--  
Stickly-Prickly, that's him!

The Mother Jaguar stopped lashing her tail and asked me to write it down. She was still trying to get her son to remember it when the elevator doors opened on the fifth floor and we got out.

"I thought we were going to the Jurisdiction offices," I said as we walked along the corridors of the Great Library, the wooden shelves groaning under the weight of the collected imaginative outpourings of nearly two millennia.

"The next roll call is tomorrow," Miss Havisham replied, stopping at a shelf and dropping the grammasite's waistcoats into a heap before picking out a roughly bound manuscript, "and I told Perkins you'd help him feed the Minotaur."

"You did?" I asked slightly apprehensively.

"Of course. Fictionalzoology is a fascinating subject and believe me, it's an area in which you should know more."

She handed me the book, which, I noticed, was handwritten.

"It's code-word protected," announced Havisham. "Mumble *sapphire* before you read yourself in." She gathered up the waistcoats again. "I'll pick you up in about an hour. Perkins will be waiting for you on the other side. Please pay attention and don't let him talk you into looking after any rabbits. Don't forget the password--you'll not get in or out without it."

"Sapphire," I repeated.

"Very good," she said, and vanished.

I placed the book on one of the reading desks and sat down. The marble busts of writers that dotted the library seemed to glare at me, and I was just about to start reading when I noticed, high up on the shelf opposite, an ethereal form that was coalescing, wraithlike, in front of my eyes. At home this might be considered a matter of great pith and moment, but here it was merely the Cheshire Cat making one of his

celebrated appearances.

"Hullo!" he said as soon as his mouth had appeared. "How are you getting along?"

The Cheshire Cat was the librarian and the first person I had met in the BookWorld. With a penchant for non sequiturs and obtuse comments, it was hard not to like him.

"I'm not sure," I replied. "I was attacked by grammasites, threatened by Big Martin's friends and a Thraal. I've got two Generics billeted with me, the characters in *Caversham Heights* think I can save their book and right now I have to give the Minotaur his breakfast."

"Nothing remarkable *there*. Anything else?"

"How long have you got?"<sup>1</sup>

I tapped my ears.

"Problems?"

"I can hear two Russians gossiping, right here inside my head."

"Probably a crossed footnoterphone line," replied the Cat.

He jumped down, pressed his head against mine and listened intently.

"Can you hear them?" I asked after a bit.

"Not at all," replied the Cat, "but you do have *very* warm ears. Do you like Chinese food?"

"Yes, please." I hadn't eaten for a while.

"Me, too," mused the Cat. "Shame there isn't any. What's in the bag?"

"Something of Snell's."

"Ah. What do you think of this Ultra Word™ lark?"

"I'm really not sure," I replied, truthfully enough. "How about you?"

"How about me what?"

"What do you think of the new operating system?"

"When it comes in, I shall give it my fullest attention," he said ambiguously, adding, "It's a laugh, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"That noise you make at the back of your throat when you hear something funny. Let me know if you need anything. Bye."

And he slowly faded out, from the tip of his tail to the tip of

his nose. His grin, as usual, stayed for some time after the rest of him had gone.

I turned back to the book, murmured, "Sapphire," and read the first paragraph aloud.

## Feeding the Minotaur

**Name and Operator's Number:** Perkins, David "Pinky." AGD136-323

**Address:** c/o Perkins & Snell Detective Series

**Induction Date:** September 1957

**Notes:** Perkins joined the service and has shown exemplary conduct throughout his service career. After signing up for a twenty-year tour of duty, he extended that to another tour in 1977. After five years heading the mispeling Protection Squad, he was transferred to grammasite inspection and eradication and in 1981 took over leadership of the grammasite research facility.

ENTRY FROM JURISFICTION SERVICE RECORD  
(ABRIDGED)

I FOUND MYSELF IN a large meadow next to a babbling brook. Willows and larches hung over the crystal clear waters while mature oaks punctuated the land. It was warm and dry and quite delightful--like a perfect summer's day in England, in fact, and I suddenly felt quite homesick.

"I used to look at the view a lot," said a voice close at hand. "Don't seem to have the time, these days."

I turned to see a tall and laconic man leaning against a silver birch, holding a copy of the Jurisfiction trade paper, *Movable Type*. I recognized him although we had never been introduced. It was Perkins, who partnered Snell at Jurisfiction, much as they did in the Perkins & Snell series of detective novels.

"Hello," he said, proffering a hand and smiling broadly, "put it there. Perkins is the name. Akrid tells me you sorted Hopkins out good and proper."

"Thank you. Akrid's very kind, but it isn't over yet."

He cast an arm towards the horizon. "What do you think?"

I looked at the view. High, snowcapped mountains rose in the distance above a green and verdant plain. At the foot of the hills were forests, and a large river wended its way through the valley.

"Beautiful."



"We bought it from the fantasy division of the Well of Lost Plots. It's a complete world in itself, written for a sword-and-sorcery novel entitled *The Sword of the Zenobians*. Beyond the mountains are icy wastes, deep fjords and relics of long-forgotten civilizations, castles, that sort of stuff. It was auctioned off when the book was abandoned. There were no characters or events written in, which was a shame--considering the work he did on the world itself, this might have been a bestseller. Still, the Outland's loss is our gain. We use it to keep grammasites and other weird beasts who for one reason or another can't live safely within their own books."

"Sanctuary?"

"Yes--and also for study and containment--hence the password."

"There seem to be an awful lot of rabbits," I observed, looking around.

"Ah, yes," replied Perkins, crossing a stone-arched bridge that spanned the small stream, "we never did get the lid on reproduction within *Watership Down*--if left to their own devices, the book would be so full of dandelion-munching lagomorphs that every other word would be *rabbit* within a year. Still, Lennie enjoys it here when he has some time off."

We walked up a path towards a ruined castle. Grass covered the mounds of masonry that had collapsed from the curtain wall, and the wood of the drawbridge had rotted and fallen into a moat now dry and full of brambles. Above us, what appeared to be ravens circled the highest of the remaining towers.

"Not birds," said Perkins, handing me a pair of binoculars. "Have a look."

I peered up at the circling creatures who were soaring on large wings of stretched skin. "Parenthiums?"

"Very good. I have six breeding pairs here--purely for research, I hasten to add. Most books can easily support forty or so with no ill effects--it's just when the numbers get out of hand that we have to take action. A swarm of grammasites can be pretty devastating."

"I know, I was almost--"

"Watch out!"

He pushed me aside as a lump of excrement splattered on the ground near where I had been standing. I looked up at the battlements and saw a man-beast covered in coarse, dark hair who glared down at us and made a strangled cry in the back of his throat.

"Yahoos," explained Perkins with disdain. "They're not terribly well behaved and *quite* beyond training."

"From *Gulliver's Travels*?"

"Bingo. When truly original works like Jonathan Swift's are made into new books, characters are often duplicated for evaluation and consultative purposes. Characters can be retrained, but *creatures* usually end up here. Yahoos are not exactly a favorite of mine but they're harmless enough, so the best thing to do is ignore them."

We walked quickly under the keep to avoid any other possible missiles and entered the inner bailey, where a pair of centaurs were grazing peacefully. They looked up at us, smiled, waved and carried on eating. I noticed that one of them was listening to a Walkman.

"You have centaurs here?"

"And satyrs, troglodytes, chimeras, elves, fairies, dryads, sirens, Martians, leprechauns, goblins, harpies, aliens, daleks, trolls--you name it." Perkins smiled. "A large proportion of unpublished novels are in the fantasy genre, and most of them feature mythical beasts. Whenever one of those books gets demolished, I can usually be found down at the salvage yard. It would be a shame to reduce them to text, now wouldn't it?"

"Do you have unicorns?"

"Yes," sighed Perkins, "sackloads. More than I know what to do with. I wish potential writers would be more responsible with their creations. I can understand children writing about them, but adults should know better. Every unicorn in every demolished story ends up here. I had this idea for a bumper sticker: 'A unicorn isn't for page twenty-seven, it's for eternity.' What do you think?"

"I think you won't be able to stop people writing about them. How about taking the horn off and seeking placement in pony books?"

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that," replied Perkins stonily,

adding, "We have dragons, too. We can hear them sometimes, at night when the wind is in the right direction. When--or *if*--Pellinore captures the Questing Beast, it will come to live here. Somewhere a long way away, I hope. Careful--don't tread in the Orc shit. You're an Outlander, aren't you?"

"Born and bred."

"Has anyone realized that platypuses and sea horses are fictional?"

"Are they?"

"Of course--you don't think anything that weird could have evolved by chance, do you? By the way, how do you like Miss Havisham?"

"I like her a great deal."

"So do we all. I think she quite likes us, too, but she'd never admit it."

We had arrived at the inner keep and Perkins pushed open the door. Inside was his office and laboratory. One wall was covered with glass jars filled with odd creatures of all shapes and sizes, and on the table was a partially dissected grammasite. Within its gut were words being digested into letters.

"I'm not really sure how they do it," said Perkins, prodding at the carcass with a spoon. "Have you met Mathias?"

I looked around but could see nothing but a large chestnut horse whose flanks shone in the light. The horse looked at me and I looked at the horse, then past the horse--but no one else was in the room. The penny dropped.

"Good morning, Mathias," I said as politely as I could. "I'm Thursday Next."

Perkins laughed out loud and the horse brayed and replied in a deep voice, "Delighted to make your acquaintance, madam. Permit me to join you in a few moments?"

I agreed and the horse returned to what I now saw were some complicated notes it was writing in a ledger open on the floor. Every now and then it paused and dipped the quill that was attached to its hoof into an inkpot and wrote in a large copperplate script.

"A Houyhnhnm?" I asked. "Also from *Gulliver's Travels*?"

Perkins nodded. "Mathias, his mare and the two Yahoos

were all used as consultants for Pierre Boulle's 1963 remake: *La planete des singes*."

"Louis Aragon once said," announced Mathias from the other side of the room, "that the function of geniuses was to furnish cretins with ideas twenty years on."

"I hardly think that Boulle was a cretin, Mathias," said Perkins, "and anyway, it's always the same with you, isn't it? 'Voltaire said this,' 'Baudelaire said that.' Sometimes I think that you just, just--"

He stopped, trying to think of the right words.

"Was it da Vinci who said," suggested the horse helpfully, "that anyone who quotes authors in discussion is using their memory, not their intellect?"

"Exactly," replied the frustrated Perkins, "what I was about to say."

"*Tempora mutantur, et nos mutamur in illis*," murmured the horse, staring at the ceiling in thought.

"The only thing *that* proves is how pretentious you are," muttered Perkins. "It's always the same when we have visitors, isn't it?"

"Someone has to raise the tone in this miserable backwater," replied Mathias, "and if you call me a 'pseudo-erudite ungulate' again, I shall bite you painfully on the buttock."

Perkins and the horse glared at one another.

"You said there was a pair of Houyhnhnms?" I asked, trying to defuse the situation.

"My partner, my love, my mare," explained the horse, "is currently at Oxford, *your* Oxford--studying political science at All Souls."

"Don't they notice?" I asked. "A horse, at Oxford?"

"You'd be surprised how unobservant some of the professors are," replied Perkins. "Napoleon the pig studied Marxism at Nuffield. Got a first, too. This way. I keep the Minotaur in the dungeons. You are fully conversant with the legend?"

"Of course," I replied. "It's the half-man, half-bull offspring of King Minos' wife, Pasiphae."

"Spot on." Perkins chuckled. "The tabloids had a field day: 'Cretan Queen in Bull Love-Child Shock.' We built a copy of the labyrinth to hold it, but the Monsters' Humane Society

insisted two officials inspect it first."

"And?"

"That was over twelve years ago; I think they're still in it. I keep the Minotaur in here."

He opened a door that led into a vaulted room below the old hall. It was dark and smelt of rotten bones and sweat.

"Er, you do keep it locked up?" I asked as my eyes struggled to see in the semidark.

"Of course!" he replied, nodding towards a large key hanging from a hook. "What do you think I am, an idiot?"

As my eyes became accustomed to the gloom, I could see that the back half of the vault was caged off with rusty iron bars. A door in the center was secured with a ridiculously large padlock.

"Don't get too near," warned Perkins as he took a steel bowl down from a shelf. "I've been feeding him on yogurt for almost five years, and to be truthful he's getting a bit bored."

"Yogurt?"

"With some bran mixed in. Feeding him on Grecian virgins was too expensive."

"Wasn't he slain by Theseus?" I asked, as a dark shape started moving at the back of the vault accompanied by a low growling noise. Even with the bars I really wasn't happy to be there.

"Usually," replied Perkins, ladling out some yogurt, "but mischievous Generics took him out of a copy of Graves's *The Greek Myths* in 1944 and dropped him in Stalingrad. A sharp-eyed Jurisdiction agent figured out what was going on and we took him out--he's been here ever since."

Perkins filled the steel bowl with yogurt, mixed in some bran from a large dustbin and then placed the bowl on the floor a good five feet from the bars. He pushed the dish the remainder of the way with the handle of a floor mop.

As we watched, the Minotaur appeared from the dark recesses of the cage and I felt the hair bristle on the back of my neck. His large and muscular body was streaked with dirt, and sharpened horns sprouted from his bull-like head. He moved with the low gait of an ape, using his forelegs to steady himself. As I watched, he put out two clawed hands to retrieve

the bowl, then slunk off to a dark corner. I caught a glimpse of his fangs in the dim light, and a pair of deep yellow eyes that glared at me with hungry malevolence.

"I'm thinking of calling him Norman," murmured Perkins. "Come on, I want to show you something."

We left the dark and fetid area beneath the old hall and walked back into the laboratory, where Perkins opened a large leatherbound book that was sitting on the table.

"This is the Jurisfiction bestiary," he explained, turning the page to reveal a picture of the grammasite we had encountered in *Great Expectations*.

"An adjectivore," I murmured.

"Very good. Fairly common in the Well but under control in fiction generally."

He turned a page to reveal a sort of angler fish, but instead of a light dangling on a wand sticking out of its head, it had the indefinite article.

"Nounfish," explained Perkins. "They swim the outer banks of the Text Sea, hoping to attract and devour stray nouns eager to start an embryonic sentence."

He turned the page to reveal a picture of a small maggot.

"A bookworm?" I suggested, having seen these before at my uncle Mycroft's workshop.

"Indeed. Not strictly a pest and actually quite necessary to the existence of the BookWorld. They take words and expel alternate meanings like a hot radiator. I think earthworms are the nearest equivalent in the Outland. They aerate the soil, yes?"

I nodded.

"Bookworms do the same job down here. Without them, words would have one meaning, and meanings would have one word. They live in thesauri but their benefit is felt throughout fiction."

"So why are they considered a pest?"

"Useful, but not without their drawbacks. Get too many bookworms in your novel and the language becomes almost unbearably flowery."

"I've read books like that," I confessed.

He turned the page and I recognized the grammasites that

had swarmed through the Well earlier.

"Verbisoid," he said with a sigh, "to be destroyed without mercy. Once the Verbisoid extracts the verb from a sentence, it generally collapses; do that once too often and the whole narrative falls apart like a bread roll in a rainstorm."

"Why do they wear waistcoats and stripy socks?"

"To keep warm, I should imagine."

"Ah. What about the mispeling virus?"

"*Speltificarious molesworthian*," murmured Perkins, moving to where a pile of dictionaries were stacked up around a small glass jar. He picked out the container and showed it to me. A thin purple haze seemed to wisp around inside; it reminded me of one of Spike's SEBs.

"This is the larst of the virus," explained Perkins. "We had to distroy the wrist. Wotch this."

He picked up a letter opener and delicately brought it towards the virus. As I watched, the opener started to twist and change shape until it looked more like a miniature sheaf of papers--an operetta, complete with libretto and score. I think it was *The Pirates of Penzance*, but I couldn't be sure.

"The virus works on a subtextual level and disstorts the meaning of a wurd," explained Perkins, removing the operetta, which morphed back to its previous state. "The mispeling arises as a consekwence of this."

He replaced the jar back in the dictosafe.

"So the mispeling itself is really only a symptom of sense distortion?"

"Exactly so. The virus was rampant before Agent Johnson's *Dictionary* in 1744," added Perkins. "*Lavinia-Webster* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* keep it all in check, but we have to be careful. We used to contain any outbreak and off-load it in the *Molesworth* series, where no one ever notices. These days we destroy any new virus with a battery of dictionaries we keep on the seventeenth floor of the Great Library. But we can't be too careful. *Every* mispeling you come across has to be reported to the Cat on a form S-12."

There was the raucous blast of a car horn from outside.

"Time's up!" Perkins smiled. "That will be Miss Havisham."

Miss Havisham was not on her own. She was sitting in a vast automobile, the bonnet of which stretched ten feet in front of her. The large-spoked and unguarded wheels carried tires that looked woefully skinny and inadequate; eight huge exhaust pipes sprouted from either side of the bonnet, joined into one and stretched the length of the body. The tail of the car was pointed, like a boat, and just forward of the rear wheels two huge drive sprockets carried the power to the rear axle on large chains. It was a fearsome beast. It was the twenty-seven-liter Higham Special.



## 8.

### Ton-Sixty on the A419

The wealthy son of a Polish count and an American mother, Louis Zborowski lived at Higham Place near Canterbury, where he built three aero-engined cars, all called Chitty Bang Bang. But there was a fourth: the Higham Special, a car he and Clive Gallop had engineered by squeezing a twenty-seven-liter aero-engine into a Rubery Owen chassis and mating it with a Benz gearbox. At the time of Zborowski's death at Monza behind the wheel of a Mercedes, the Special had been lapping Brooklands at 116 mph--but her potential was as yet unproved. After a brief stint with a lady owner whose identity has not been revealed, the Special was sold to Parry Thomas, who with careful modifications of his own pushed the land speed record up to 170.624 mph at Pendine sands, south Wales, in 1926.

THE VERY REVEREND MR. TOREDLYNE,  
*The Land Speed Record*

**H**AS SHE BEEN boring you, Mr. Perkins?" called out Havisham.

"Not at all," replied Perkins, giving me a wink, "she has been a most attentive student."

"Humph," muttered Havisham. "Hope springs eternal. Get in, girl, we're off!"

I paused. I had been driven by Miss Havisham once before, and that was in a car that I thought relatively safe. This beast of an automobile looked as though it could kill you twice before even reaching second gear.

"What are you waiting for, girl?" said Havisham impatiently. "If I let the Special idle any longer, we'll coke up the plugs. Besides, I'll need all the fuel to do the run."

"The run?"

"Don't worry!" shouted Miss Havisham as she revved the engine. The car lurched sideways with the torque, and a throaty growl filled the air. "You won't be aboard when I do--you're needed for other duties."

I took a deep breath and climbed into the small two-seater body. It looked newly converted and was little more than a racing car with a few frills tacked on to make it roadworthy.

Miss Havisham depressed the clutch and wrestled with the gearshift for a moment. The large sprockets took up the power with a slight tug; it felt like a Thoroughbred racehorse that had just got the scent of a steeplechase.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Home!" answered Miss Havisham as she moved the hand throttle. The car leaped forward across the grassy courtyard and gathered speed.

"To *Great Expectations*?" I asked as Miss Havisham steered in a broad circuit, fiddling with the levers in the center of the massive steering wheel.

"Not my home," she retorted, "yours!"

With another deep growl and a lurch the car accelerated rapidly forward--but to where I was not sure. In front of us lay the broken drawbridge and stout stone walls of the castle.

"Fear not!" yelled Havisham above the roar of the engine. "I'll read us into the Outland as easy as blinking!"

We gathered speed. I expected us to jump straightaway, but we didn't. We carried on towards the heavy castle wall at a speed not wholly compatible with survival.

"Miss Havisham?" I asked, my voice tinged with fear.

"I'm just trying to think of the best words to get us there, girl!" she replied cheerfully.

"Stop!" I yelled as the point of no return came and went in a flash.

"Let me see . . . ," muttered Havisham, thinking hard, the accelerator still wide open.

I covered my eyes. The car was running too fast to jump out and a collision seemed inevitable. I grasped the side of the car's body and tensed as Miss Havisham took herself, me and two tons of automobile through the barriers of fiction and into the real world. *My* world.

I opened my eyes again. Miss Havisham was studying a road map as the Higham Special swerved down the middle of the road. I grabbed the steering wheel as a milk-float swerved into the hedge.

"I won't use the M4 in case the C of G get wind of it," she said, looking around. "We'll use the A419--are we anywhere

close?"

I recognized where we were instantly. Just north of Swindon outside a small town called Highworth.

"Continue round the roundabout and up the hill into the town," I told her, adding, "but it's *not* your right of way, remember."

It was too late. To Miss Havisham, her way *was* the right way. The first car braked in time but the one behind it was not so lucky--it drove into the rear of the first with a crunch. I held on tightly as Miss Havisham accelerated rapidly away up the hill into Highworth. I was pressed into my seat, and for a single moment, perched above two tons of bellowing machinery, I suddenly realized why Havisham liked this sort of thing--it was, in a word, *exhilarating*.

"I've only borrowed the Special from the count," she explained. "Parry Thomas will take delivery of it next week and aim to lift the speed record for himself. I've been working on a new mix of fuels; the A419 is straight and smooth--I should be able to do at least a ton-eighty on *that*."

"Turn right onto the B4019 at the Jesmond," I told her, "*after* the lights turn to greeeeeeeen."

The truck missed us by about six inches.

"What's that?"

"Nothing."

"You know, Thursday, you should really loosen up and learn to enjoy life more--you can be such an old stick-in-the-mud."

I lapsed into silence.

"And don't sulk," added Miss Havisham. "If there's something I can't abide, it's a sulky apprentice."

We bowled down the road, nearly losing it on an S-bend, until miraculously we reached the main Swindon-Cirencester road. It was a no right turn but we did anyway, to a chorus of screeching tires and angry car horns. Havisham accelerated off, and we had just approached the top of the hill when we came across a large *Diversion* sign blocking the road. Havisham thumped the steering wheel angrily.

"I don't believe it!" she bellowed.

"Road closed?" I queried, trying to hide my relief. "Good--I mean, good-*ness* gracious, what a shame--another time, eh?"

Havisham clunked the Special into first gear and we moved off round the sign and motored down the hill.

"It's *him*, I can sense it!" she growled. "Trying to steal the speed record from under my very nose!"

"Who?"

As if in answer, another racing car shot past us with a loud *poop poop!*

"*Him*," muttered Havisham as we pulled off the road next to a speed camera. "A driver so bad he is a menace to himself and every sentient being on the highways."

He must have been truly frightful for Havisham to notice. A few minutes later the other car returned and pulled up alongside.

"What ho, Havisham!" said the driver, taking the goggles from his bulging eyes and grinning broadly. "Still using Count 'Snail' Zborowski's old slowpoke Special, eh?"

"Good afternoon, Mr. Toad," said Havisham. "Does the Bellman know you're in the Outland?"

"Of course not!" yelled Mr. Toad, laughing. "And you're not going to tell him, old girl, because you're not meant to be here either!"

Havisham was silent and looked ahead, trying to ignore him.

"Is that a Liberty aero-engine under there?" asked Mr. Toad, pointing at the Special's bonnet, which trembled and shook as the vast engine idled roughly to itself.

"Perhaps," replied Havisham.

"Ha!" replied Toad with an infectious smile. "I had a Rolls-Royce Merlin shoehorned into this old banger!"

I watched Miss Havisham with interest. She stared ahead but her eye twitched slightly when Mr. Toad revved his car's engine. In the end, she could resist it no more and her curiosity got the better of her disdain.

"How does it go?" she asked, eyes gleaming.

"Like a rocket!" replied Mr. Toad, jumping up and down in his excitement. "Over a thousand horses to the back axle--makes your Higham Special look like a motor-mower!"

"We'll see about *that*," replied Havisham, narrowing her eyes. "Usual place, usual time, usual bet?"

"You're on!" Mr. Toad revved his car, pulled down his

goggles and vanished in a cloud of rubber smoke. The *poop poop* of his horn lingered on as an echo some seconds after he had gone.

"Slimy reptile," muttered Havisham.

"Strictly speaking, he's neither," I retorted. "More like a dry-skinned, land-based amphibian."

It felt safe to be impertinent because I knew she wasn't listening.

"He's caused more accidents than you've had hot dinners."

"And you're going to race him?" I asked slightly nervously.

"And beat him, too, what's more." She handed me a pair of bolt cutters.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Open up the speed camera and get the film out once I've done my run."

She donned a pair of goggles and was gone in a howl of engine noise and screeching of tires. I looked nervously around as she and the car hurtled off into the distance, the roar of the engine fading into a hum, occasionally punctuated by muffled cracks from the exhaust. I looked around. The sun was out and I could see at least three airships droning across the sky; I wondered what was going on at SpecOps. I had written a note to Victor telling him I had to be away for a year or more and tendered my resignation. Suddenly I was shaken from my daydream by something else. Something dark and just out of sight. Something I should have done or something I'd forgotten. I shivered and then it clicked. Last night. Gran. Aornis's mindworm. What had she been unraveling in my mind? I sighed as the pieces slowly started to merge together in my head. Gran had told me to run the facts over and over to renew the familiar memories that Aornis was trying to delete. But how do you start trying to find out what it is you've forgotten? I concentrated. . . . Landen. I hadn't thought about him all day and that was unusual. I could remember where we met and what had happened to him--no problem there. Anything else? His full name. Damn and blast! Landen Parke-*something*. Did it begin with a B? I couldn't remember. I sighed and placed my hand on where I imagined our baby to be, now the size of a half crown. I remembered enough to know I loved

him, and I missed him dreadfully--which was a good sign, I supposed. I thought of Lavoisier's perfidy and the Schitt brothers and started to feel rage building inside me. I closed my eyes and tried to relax. There was a phone box by the side of the road, and on impulse I called my mother.

"Hi, Mum, it's Thursday."

"Thursday!" she screamed excitedly. "Hang on--the stove's on fire."

"The stove?"

"Well, the kitchen really--wait a mo!"

There was a crashing noise and she came back on the line a few seconds later.

"Out now. Darling! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Mum."

"And the baby?"

"Fine, too. How are things with you?"

"Frightful! Goliath and SpecOps have been camping outside since the moment you left, and Emma Hamilton is living in the spare room and eats like a horse."

There was an angry growl and a loud whooshing noise as Havisham swept past in little more than a blur. Two flashes from the speed camera went off in quick succession, and there were several more loud bangs as Havisham rolled off the throttle.

"What was that noise?" asked my mother.

"You'd never believe me if I told you. My, er, *husband* hasn't been round looking for me, has he?"

"I'm afraid not, sweetheart," she said in her most understanding voice. She knew about Landen and understood better than most--her own husband, my father, had been eradicated himself seventeen years previously. "Why don't you come round and talk. The Eradications Anonymous meeting is at eight this evening; you'll be among friends there."

"I don't think so, Mum."

"Are you eating regularly?"

"Yes, Mum."

"I managed to get DH-82 to do a few tricks."

DH-82 was her rescue thylacine. Training a usually unbelievably torpid thylacine to do anything except eat or

sleep on command was almost front-page news.

"That's good. Listen, I just called to say I missed you and not to worry about me--"

"I'm going to try another run!" shouted Miss Havisham, who had drawn up. I waved to her and she drove off.

"Are you keeping Pickwick's egg warm?"

I told Mum that this was Pickwick's job, that I would call again and hung up. I thought of ringing Bowden but decided on the face of it that this was probably not a good idea. Mum's phone was bound to have been tapped and I had given them enough already. I walked back to the road and watched as a small gray dot grew larger and larger until it swept past with a strident bellow. The speed camera flashed again and a belch of flame erupted from the exhaust pipe. It took Miss Havisham about a mile to slow down, so I sat on a wall and waited patiently for her to return. A small four-seater airship had appeared no more than half a mile away. It appeared to be a SpecOps traffic patrol and I couldn't risk them finding out who I was. I looked urgently towards where Havisham was motoring slowly back to me.

"Come on," I muttered under my breath, "put some speed on, for goodness' sake."

Havisham pulled up and shook her head sadly. "Mixture's too rich. Take the film out of the speed camera, will you?"

I pointed out the airship heading our way. It was approaching quite fast--for an airship.

Miss Havisham looked over at it, grunted and jumped down to open the huge bonnet and peer inside. I cut off the padlock, pulled the speed camera down and rewound the film as quickly as I could.

"Halt!" barked the PA system on the airship when it was within a few hundred yards. "You are both under arrest. Wait by your vehicle."

"We've got to go," I said, this time more urgently.

"Poppycok!" replied Miss Havisham.

"Place you hands on the bonnet of the car!" yelled the PA as the airship droned past at treetop level. "You have been warned!"

"Miss Havisham, if they find out who I am, I could be in a

lot of trouble!"

"Nonsense, girl. Why would they want someone as inconsequential as you?"

The airship swung round with the vectored engines in reverse; once they started asking questions, I'd be answering them for a long time.

"We have to go, Miss Havisham!"

She sensed the urgency in my voice and beckoned for me to get in the car. Within a moment we were away from that place, car and all, back to the lobby of the Great Library.

"You're not so popular in the Outland, then?" Havisham asked, turning off the engine, which spluttered and shook to a halt, the sudden quiet a welcome break.

"You could say that."

"Broken the law?"

"Not really."

She stared at me for a moment. "I thought it a bit odd that Goliath had you trapped in their deepest and most secure subbasement. Do you have the film from the speed camera?"

I handed it over.

"I'll get double prints," she mused. "Thanks for your help. See you at roll call tomorrow--don't be late!"

I waited until she had gone, then retraced my steps to the library where I had left Snell's head-in-a-bag plot device and made my way home. I didn't jump direct; I took the elevator. Bookjumping might be a quick way to get around, but it was also kind of knacker.



## Apples Benedict, a Hedgehog and Commander Bradshaw

**ImaginoTransferenceRecordingDevice:** A machine used to write books in the Well, the ITRD resembles a large horn (typically eight feet across and made of brass) attached to a polished mahogany mixing board a little like a church organ but with many more stops and levers. As the story is enacted in front of the *collecting horn*, the actions, dialogue, humor, pathos, etc., are collected, mixed and transmitted as raw data to Text Grand Central, where the wordsmiths hammer it into readable storycode. Once done, it is beamed direct to the author's pen or typewriter, and from there through a live footnoterphone link back to the Well as plain text. The page is read, and if all is well, it is added to the manuscript and the characters move on. The beauty of the system is that authors never suspect a thing--they think *they* do all the work.

COMMANDER TRAFFORD BRADSHAW, CBE  
*Bradshaw's Guide to the BookWorld*

**I'M HOME!"** I yelled as I walked through the door. Pickwick plocked happily up to me, realized I didn't have any marshmallows and then left in a huff, only to return with the gift of a piece of paper she had found in the wastepaper basket. I thanked her profusely and she went back to her egg.

"Hello," said ibb, who had been experimenting, Beeton-like, in the kitchen. "What's in the bag?"

"You don't want to know."

"Hmm," replied ibb thoughtfully, "since I wouldn't have asked if I *didn't* want to know, your response must be another way of saying, 'I'm not going to tell you, so sod off.' Is that correct?"

"More or less," I replied, placing the bag in the broom cupboard. "Is Gran around?"

"I don't think so."

obb walked in a little later, reading a textbook entitled *Personalities for Beginners*.

"Hello, Thursday," it said. "A hedgehog and a tortoise came

round to see you this afternoon."

"What did they want?"

"They didn't say."

"And Gran?"

"In the Outland. She said not to wait up for her. You look very tired; are you okay?"

It was true, I *was* tired, but I wasn't sure why. Stress? It's not every day that you have to fight swarms of grammasites and deal with Havisham's driving, Yahoos, Thraals, Big Martin's friends or head-in-a-bag plot devices. Maybe it was just the baby playing silly buggers with my hormones.

"What's for supper?" I asked, slumping in a chair and closing my eyes.

"I've been experimenting with alternative recipes," said ibb, "so we're having Apples Benedict."

"*Apples* Benedict?"

"Yes; it's like Eggs Benedict but with--"

"I get the picture. Anything else?"

"Of course. You could try Turnips a l'Orange or Macaroni Custard; for pudding I've made Anchovy Trifle and Herring Fool. What will you have?"

"Beans on toast."

I sighed. It was like being back home at mother's.

I didn't dream that night. Landen was absent, but then so, too, was . . . was . . . what's-her-name. I slept soundly and missed the alarm. I woke up feeling terrible and just lay flat on my back, breathing deeply and trying to push away the clouds of nausea. There was a rap at the door.

"ibb!" I yelled. "Can you get that?"

My head throbbed but there was no answer. I glanced at the clock; it was nearly nine and both of them would be out at St. Tabularasa's practicing whimsical asides or something. I hauled myself out of bed, steadied myself for a moment, wrapped myself in a dressing gown and went downstairs. No one was there when I opened the door. I was just closing it when a small voice said:

"We're down here."

It was a hedgehog and a tortoise. But the hedgehog wasn't

like Mrs. Tiggy-winkle, who was as tall as me; this hedgehog and tortoise were just the size they should have been.

"Thursday Next?" said the hedgehog.

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"You can stop poking your nose in where it's not wanted," said the hedgehog haughtily, "that's what you can do."

"I don't understand."

"Painted Jaguar?" suggested the tortoise. "*Can't curl, can swim*. Ring any bells, smart aleck?"

"Oh! You must be Stickly-Prickly and Slow-Solid."

"The same. And that little mnemonic you so *kindly* gave to the Painted Jaguar is going to cause us a few problems--the dopey feline will never forget *that* in a month of Sundays."

I sighed. Living in the BookWorld was a great deal more complicated than I had imagined.

"Well, why don't you learn to swim or something?"

"Who, me?" said Stickly-Prickly. "Don't be absurd; whoever heard of a hedgehog swimming?"

"And you could learn to curl," I added to Slow-Solid.

"Curl?" replied the tortoise indignantly. "I don't think so, thank you very much."

"Give it a go," I persisted. "Unlace your backplates a little and try and touch your toes."

There was a pause. The hedgehog and the tortoise looked at one another and giggled.

"Won't Painted Jaguar be surprised!" they chortled, thanked me and left.

I closed the door, sat down and looked in the fridge, shrugged and ate a large portion of Apples Benedict before having a long and relaxing shower.

The corridors of the Well were as busy as the day before. Traders bustled with buyers, deals were done, orders taken, bargains struck. Every now and then I saw characters fading in and out as their trade took them from book to book. I looked at the shop-fronts as I walked past, trying to guess how they did what they did. There were holesmiths, grammatacists, pacesetters, mood-mongers, paginators--you name it.<sup>1</sup>

It was the junkfootnoterphones starting up again. I tried to

shut it out but only succeeded in lowering the volume. As I walked along, I noticed a familiar figure amongst the traders and plot speculators. He was dressed in his usual African-explorer garb: safari jacket, pith helmet, shorts, stout boots and a revolver in a leather holster. It was Commander Bradshaw, star of thirty-four thrilling adventure stories for boys available in hardback at 7/6 each. Out of print since the thirties, Bradshaw entertained himself in his retirement by being something of an eminence grise at Jurisfiction. He had seen and done it all--or claimed he had.

"A hundred!" he exclaimed bitterly as I drew closer. "Is that the best you can offer?"

The Action Sequence trader he was talking to shrugged. "We don't get much call for lion attacks these days."

"But it's terrifying, man, terrifying!" exclaimed Bradshaw. "Real hot-breath-down-the-back-of-your-neck stuff. Brighten up contemporary romantic fiction no end, I should wager--make a change from parties and frocks, what?"

"A hundred and twenty, then. Take it or leave it."

"Bloodsucker!" mumbled Bradshaw, taking the money and handing over a small glass globe with the lion attack, I presumed, safely freeze-dried within. He turned away from the trader and caught me looking at him. He quickly hid the cash and raised his pith helmet politely.

"Good morning!"

"Good morning," I replied.

He waved a finger at me. "It's Havisham's apprentice, isn't it? What was your name again?"

"Thursday Next."

"Is it, by gum! Well, I never."

He was, I noticed, a good foot taller than the last time we had met. He now almost came up to my shoulder.

"You're much--" I began, then checked myself.

"Taller?" he guessed. "Quite correct, girlie. Appreciate a woman who isn't trammled by the conventions of good manners. Melanie--that's the wife, you know--she's pretty rude, too. 'Trafford,' she says--that's my name, Trafford--'Trafford,' she said, 'you are a worthless heap of elephant dung.' Well, this was from out the blue--I had just returned home after a

harrowing adventure in Central Africa where I was captured and nearly roasted on a spit. The sacred emerald of the Umpopo had been stolen by two Swedish prospectors and--"

"Commander Bradshaw," I interrupted, desperate to stop him from recounting one of his highly unlikely and overtly jingoistic adventures, "have you seen Miss Havisham this morning?"

"Quite right to interrupt me," he said cheerfully, "appreciate a woman who knows when to subtly tell a boring old fart to button his lip. You and Mrs. Bradshaw have a lot in common. You must meet up someday."

We walked down the busy corridor.<sup>2</sup>

I tapped my ears.

"Problems?" inquired Bradshaw.

"Yes, I've got two gossiping Russians inside my head again."

"Crossed line? Infernal contraptions. Have a word with Plum at JurisTech if it persists. I say," he went on, lowering his voice and looking round furtively, "you won't tell anyone about that lion-attack sale, will you? If the story gets around that old Bradshaw is cashing in his Action Sequences, I'll never hear the last of it."

"I won't say a word," I assured him as we avoided a trader trying to sell us surplus B-3 Darcy clones, "but do many people try and sell off parts of their own books?"

"Oh, yes. But only if they are out of print and can spare it. Trouble is, I'm a bit strapped for the old moola. What with the BookWorld Awards coming up and Mrs. Bradshaw a bit shy in public, I thought a new dress might be just the ticket--and the cost of clothes are pretty steep down here, y'know."

"It's the same in the Outland."

"Is it, by George?" he guffawed. "The Well always reminds me of the market in Nairobi; how about you?"

"There seems to be an awful lot of bureaucracy. I would have thought a fiction factory would be, by definition, a lot more free and relaxed."

"If you think this is bad, you ought to visit nonfiction. Over there, the rules governing the correct use of a semicolon alone run to several volumes. *Anything* devised by man has bureaucracy, corruption and error hardwired at inception,

m'girl. I'm surprised you hadn't figured that out yet. What do you think of the Well?"

"I'm still a bit new to it."

"Really? Let me help you out."

He stopped and looked around for a moment, then pointed out a man in his early twenties who was walking towards us. He was dressed in a long riding jacket and carried a battered leather suitcase emblazoned with the names of books and plays he had visited in his trade.

"Yes?"

"He's an artisan--a *holesmith*."

"He's a plasterer?"

"No; he fills *narrative* holes--plot and expository anomalies--bloopholes. If a writer said something like 'The daffodils bloomed in summer' or 'They checked the ballistics report on the shotgun,' then artisans like him are there to sort it out. It's one of the final stages of construction just before the grammatacists, echolocators and spellcheckers move in to smooth everything over."

The young man had drawn level with us by this time.

"Hello, Mr. Starboard," said Bradshaw to the holesmith, who gave a wan smile of recognition.

"Commander Bradshaw," he muttered slightly hesitantly, "what a truly delightful honor it is to meet you again, sir. Mrs. Bradshaw quite well?"

"Quite well, thank you. This is Miss Next--new at the department. I'm showing her the ropes."

The holesmith shook my hand and made welcoming noises.

"I closed a hole in *Great Expectations* the other day," I told him. "Was that one of your books?"

"Goodness me, no!" exclaimed the young man, smiling for the first time. "Holestitching has come a long way since Dickens. You won't find a holesmith worth his thread trying the old 'door opens and in comes the missing aunt/father/business associate/friend, et cetera,' all ready to explain where they've been since mysteriously dropping out of the narrative two hundred pages previously. The methodology we choose these days is to just go back and patch the hole, or more simply, to *camouflage* it."

"I see."

"Indeed," carried on the young man, becoming more flamboyant in the light of my perceived interest, "I'm working on a system that hides holes by *highlighting* them to the reader, that just says, 'Ho! I'm a hole, don't think about it!' but it's a little cutting-edge. I think," added the young man airily, "that you will not find a more experienced holesmith anywhere in the Well; I've been doing it for more than forty years."

"When did you start?" I asked, looking at the youth curiously. "As a baby?"

The young man aged, grayed and sagged before my eyes until he was in his seventies and then announced, arms outstretched and with a flourish:

"Da-daaaa!"

"No one likes a show-off, Llyster," said Bradshaw, looking at his watch. "I don't want to hurry you, Tuesday, old girl, but we should be getting over to Norland Park for the roll call."

He gallantly offered me an elbow to hold and I hooked my arm in his.

"Thank you, Commander."

"Stouter than stout!" Bradshaw said, laughing, and read us both into *Sense and Sensibility*.

**Jurisdiction Session No. 40319**

**JurisTech:** Popular contraction of Jurisdiction Technological Division. This R&D company works exclusively for Jurisdiction and is financed by the Council of Genres through Text Grand Central. Due to the often rigorous and specialized tasks undertaken by Prose Resource Operatives, Juris Tech is permitted to build gadgets deemed outside the usual laws of physics--the only department (aside from the SF genre) licensed to do so. The standard item in a PRO's manifest is the TravelBook (qv), which itself contains other JurisTech designs like the Martin-Bacon Eject-O-Hat, Punctuation Repair Kit and textual sieves of various porosity, to name but a few.

CAT FORMERLY KNOWN AS CHESHIRE,  
*Guide to the Great Library*

**T**HE OFFICES OF Jurisdiction were situated at Norland Park, the house of the Dashwoods in *Sense and Sensibility*. The family kindly lent the ballroom to Jurisdiction on the unspoken condition that Jane Austen books would be an area of special protection.

Norland Park was located within a broad expanse of softly undulating grassland set about with ancient oaks. The evening was drawing on, as it generally did, when we arrived, and wood pigeons cooed from the dovecote. The grass felt warm and comfortable like a heavily underlaid carpet, and the delicate scent of pine needles filled the air.

But all was not perfect in this garden of nineteenth-century prose; as we approached the house, there seemed to be some sort of commotion. A demonstration, in fact--the sort of thing I was used to seeing at home. But this wasn't a rally about the price of cheese or whether the Whig party were dangerously right-wing and anti-Welsh, nor of whether Goliath had the right to force legislation compelling everyone to eat SmileyBurger at least twice a week. No, this demonstration was one you would expect to find only in the world of fiction.

The Bellman, elected head of Jurisdiction and dressed in his usual garb of a town crier, was angrily tingling his bell to try



to persuade the crowd to calm down.

"Not *again*," muttered Bradshaw as we walked up. "I wonder what the Orals want this time?"

I was unfamiliar with the term *Orals*, and since I didn't want to appear foolish, I tried to make sense of the crowd on my own. The person nearest to me was a shepherdess, although that was only a guess on my part as she didn't have any sheep--only a large crook. A boy dressed in blue with a horn was standing next to her discussing the falling price of lamb, and next to them was a very old woman with a small dog who whined, pretended to be dead, smoked a pipe and performed various other tricks in quick succession. Standing next to her was a small man in a long nightdress and bed hat who yawned loudly. Perhaps I was being slow, but it was only when I saw a large egg with arms and legs that I realized who they were.

"They're all nursery rhyme characters!" I exclaimed.

"They're a pain in the whatsit, that's what they are," murmured Bradshaw as a small boy jumped from the crowd, grabbed a pig and made a dash for it. Bo-peep hooked his ankle with her crook, and the boy sprawled headlong on the grass. The pig rolled into a flower bed with a startled oink and then beat a hurried escape as a large man started to give the boy six of the best.

". . . all we want is the same rights as any other character in the BookWorld," said Humpty-Dumpty, his ovoid face a deep crimson. "Just because we have a duty to children and the oral tradition doesn't mean we can be taken advantage of."

The crowd murmured and grunted their agreement. Humpty-Dumpty continued as I stared at him, wondering whether his belt was actually a cravat, as it was impossible to tell which was his neck and which was his waist.

". . . we have a petition signed by over a thousand Orals who couldn't make it today," said the large egg, waving a wad of papers amidst shouts from the crowd.

"We're not joking this time, Mr. Bellman," added a baker who was standing in a wooden tub with a butcher and a candlestick maker. "We are quite willing to withdraw our rhymes if our terms are not met."

There was a chorus of approval from the assembled

characters.

"It was fine before they were unionized," Bradshaw whispered in my ear. "Come on, let's take the back door."

We walked around to the side of the house, our feet crunching on the gravel chippings.

"Why can't characters from the oral tradition be a part of the Character Exchange Program?" I asked.

"Who'd cover for them?" snorted Bradshaw. "You?"

"Couldn't we train up Generics as sort of, well, 'character locums'?"

"Best to leave industrial relations to the people with the facts at their fingertips. We can barely keep pace with the volume of new material as it is. I shouldn't worry about Mr. Dumpty; he's been agitating for centuries. It's not our fault he and his badly rhyming friends are still looked after by the old OralTradPlus agreement--Good heavens, Miss Dashwood! Does your mother know that you smoke?"

It was Marianne Dashwood and she had been puffing away at a small cigarette as we rounded the corner. She quickly threw the butt away and held her breath for as long as possible before coughing and letting out a large cloud of smoke.

"Commander!" she wheezed, eyes watering. "Promise you won't tell!"

"My lips are sealed," replied Bradshaw sternly, "just this once."

Marianne breathed a sigh of relief and turned to me. "Miss Next!" she enthused. "Welcome back to our little book. I trust you are well?"

"Quite well," I assured her, passing her the Marmite, Mintolas and AA batteries I had promised her from my last visit. "Will you make sure these get to your sister and mother?"

She clapped her hands with joy and took the gifts excitedly. "You are a darling!" she said happily. "What can I do to repay you?"

"Don't let Lola Vavoom play you in the movie."

"Out of my hands," she replied unhappily, "but if you need a favor, I'm here!"

We made our way up the servants' staircase and into the hall above where a much bedraggled Bellman was walking towards us, shaking his head and holding the employment demands that Humpty-Dumpty had thrust into his hands.

"Those Orals get more and more militant every day," he gasped. "They are planning a forty-eight-hour walkout tomorrow."

"What effect will that have?" I asked.

"I should have thought that would be obvious," chided the Bellman. "Nursery rhymes will be unavailable for recall. In the Outland there will be a lot of people thinking they have bad memories. It won't do the slightest bit of good--a storybook is usually in reach wherever a nursery rhyme is told."

"Ah," I said.

"The biggest problem," added the Bellman, mopping his brow, "is that if we give in to the nursery rhymsters, everyone *else* will want to renegotiate their agreements--from the poeticals all the way through to nursery stories and even characters in jokes. Sometimes I'm glad I'm up for retirement--then someone like you can take over, Commander Bradshaw!"

"Not me!" he said grimly. "I wouldn't be the Bellman again for all the *T's* in *Little Tim Tottle's twin sisters take time tittle-tattling in a tuttle-tuttle tree--twice.*"

The Bellman laughed and we entered the ballroom of Norland Park.

"Have you heard?" said a young man who approached us with no small measure of urgency in his voice. "The Red Queen had to have her leg amputated. Arterial thrombosis, the doctor told me."

"Really?" I said. "When?"

"Last week. And that's not all." He lowered his voice. "*The Bellman has gassed himself!*"

"But we were just talking to him," I replied.

"Oh," said the young man, thinking hard. "I meant *Perkins* has gassed himself."

Miss Havisham joined us.

"Billy!" she said in a scolding tone. "That's quite enough of that. Buzz off before I box your ears!"

The young man looked deflated for a moment, then pulled

himself up, announced haughtily that he had been asked to write additional dialogue for John Steinbeck and strode off. Miss Havisham shook her head sadly.

"If he ever says 'good morning,' " she said, "don't believe him. All well, Trafford?"

"Top-notch, Estella, old girl, top-notch. I bumped into Tuesday here in the Well."

"Not selling parts of your book, were you?" she asked mischievously.

"Good heavens, no!" replied Bradshaw, feigning shock and surprise. "Goodness me," he added, staring into the room for some form of escape, "I must just speak to the Warrington Unitary--I mean the authority of Cat--wait--I mean, the Cat formerly known as Cheshire. Good day!"

And tipping his pith helmet politely, he was gone.

"Bradshaw, Bradshaw," sighed Miss Havisham, shaking her head sadly. "If he flogs one more inciting incident from *Bradshaw Defies the Kaiser*, it will have so many holes we could use it as a colander."

"He needed the money to buy a dress for Mrs. Bradshaw," I explained.

"Have you met her yet?"

"Not yet."

"When you do, don't stare, will you? It's very rude."

"Why would I--"

"Come along! Almost time for roll call!"

The ballroom of Norland Park had long since been used for nothing but Jurisfiction business. The floor space was covered with tables and filing cabinets, and the many desks were piled high with files tied up with ribbon. There was a table to one side with food upon it, and waiting for us--or the Bellman, at least--were the staff at Jurisfiction. About thirty operatives were on the active list, and since up to ten of them were busy on assignment and five or so active in their own books, there were never more than fifteen people in the office at any one time. Vernham Deane gave me a cheery wave as we entered. He was the resident cad and philanderer in a Daphne Farquitt novel entitled *The Squire of High Potternews*, but you would

never know to talk to him--he had always been polite and courteous to me. Next to him was Harris Tweed, who had intervened back at the Slaughtered Lamb only the day before.

"Miss Havisham!" he exclaimed, walking over and handing us both a plain envelope. "I've got your bounty for those grammasites you killed; I split it equally, yes?"

He winked at me, then left before Havisham could say anything.

"Thursday!" said Akrid Snell, who had approached from another quarter. "Sorry to dash off like that yesterday--hello, Miss Havisham--I heard you got swarmed by a few grammasites; no one's ever shot six Verbisoids at one go before!"

"Piece of cake," I replied. "And, Akrid, I've still got that, er, thing you bought."

"Thing? What thing?"

"You remember," I urged, knowing that trying to influence his own narrative was strictly forbidden, "the *thing*. In a bag. You know."

"Oh! Ah . . . ah, yes," he said, finally realizing what I was talking about. "The *thing* thing. I'll pick it up after work, yes?"

"Snell insider-trading again?" asked Havisham quietly as soon as he had left.

"I'm afraid so."

"I'd do the same if my book was as bad as his."

I looked around to see who else had turned up. Sir John Falstaff was there, as was King Pellinore, Deane, Lady Cavendish, Mrs. Tiggy-winkle with Emperor Zhark in attendance, Gully Foyle, and Perkins.

"Who are they?" I asked Havisham, pointing to two agents I didn't recognize.

"The one on the left holding the pumpkin is Ichabod Crane. Beatrice is the other. A bit loud for my liking, but good at her job."

I thanked her and looked around for the Red Queen, whose open hostility to Havisham was Jurisfiction's least-well-kept secret; she was nowhere to be seen.

"Hail, Miss Next!" rumbled Falstaff, waddling up and staring at me unsteadily from within a cloud of alcohol fumes. He had

drunk, stolen and womanized throughout *Henry IV* parts I and II, then inveigled himself into *Merry Wives of Windsor*. Some saw him as a likable rogue; I saw him as just plain revolting--although he *was* the blueprint of likable debauchers in fiction everywhere, so I thought I should try to cut him a bit of slack.

"Good morning, Sir John," I said, trying to be polite.

"Good morning to *you*, sweet maid," he exclaimed happily. "Do you ride?"

"A little."

"Then perhaps you might like to take a ride up and down the length of my merry England? I could take you places and show you things--"

"I must politely decline, Sir John."

He laughed noisily in my face. I felt a flush of anger rise within me, but luckily the Bellman, unwilling to waste any more time, had stepped up to his small dais and tingled his bell.

"Sorry to keep you all waiting," he muttered. "As you have seen, things are a little fraught outside. But I am delighted to see so many of you here. Is there anyone still to come?"

"Shall we wait for Godot?" inquired Deane.

"Anyone know where he is?" asked the Bellman. "Beatrice, weren't you working with him?"

"Not I," replied the young woman. "You might inquire this of Benedict if he troubles to attend, but you would as well speak to a goat."

"The sweet lady's tongue does abuse to our ears," said Benedict, who had been seated out of our view but now rose to glare at Beatrice. "Were the fountain of your mind clear again, that I might water an ass at it."

"Ah!" retorted Beatrice with a laugh. "Look, he's winding up the watch of his wit; by and by it will strike!"

"Dear Beatrice," returned Benedict, bowing low, "I was looking for a fool when I found you."

"You, Benedict? Who has not so much brain as earwax?"

He thought hard for a moment. "Methink'st thou art a general offense and every man should beat thee, fair Beatrice."

They narrowed their eyes at each other and then smiled with polite enmity.

"All right, all right," interrupted the Bellman, "calm down, you two. Do you know where Agent Godot is or not?"

Beatrice answered that she didn't.

"Then," announced the Bellman, "we'll get on. Jurisdiction meeting number 40319 is now in session."

He tingled his bell again, coughed and consulted his clipboard.

"Item one. Our congratulations go to Deane and Lady Cavendish for foiling the bowdlerisers in Chaucer."

There were a few words of encouragement and backslapping.

"There has been damage done but it's got no worse, so let's just try and keep an eye out in the future. Item two."

He put down his clipboard and leaned on the lectern.

"Remember that craze a few years back in the BookWorld for sending chain letters? Receive a letter and send one on to ten friends? Well, someone has been overenthusiastic with the letter *U*--I've got a report here from the Text Sea Environmental Protection Agency saying that reserves of the letter *U* have reached dangerously low levels--we need to decrease consumption until stocks are brought back up. Any suggestions?"

"How about using a lower-case *n* upside down?" said Benedict.

"We tried that with *M* and *W* during the great *M* Migration of '62; it never worked."

"How about *respelling* what, what?" suggested King Pellinore, stroking his large white mustache. "Any word with the *our* ending could be spelt *or*, don'tchaknow."

"Like *neighbor* instead of *neighbour*?"

"It's a good idea," put in Snell. "*Labor, valor, flavor, harbor*--there must be hundreds. If we confine it to one geographical area, we can claim it as a local spelling idiosyncrasy."

"Hmm," said the Bellman, thinking hard, "do you know, it just might work."

He looked at his clipboard again. "Item three--Tweed, are you here?"

Harris Tweed signaled from where he was standing.

"Good," continued the Bellman. "I understand you were

pursuing a PageRunner who had taken up residence in the Outland?"

Tweed glanced at me and stood up.

"Fellow by the name of Yorrick Kaine. He's something of a big cheese in the Outland--runs Kaine Publishing and has set himself up as head of his own political party--"

"Yes, yes," said the Bellman impatiently, "and he stole *Cardenio*, I know. But the point is, where is he now?"

"He went back to the Outland, where I lost him," replied Tweed.

"The Council of Genres are not keen to sanction any work in the real world," said the Bellman slowly, "it's too risky. We don't even know which book Kaine is from--and since he's not doing anything against us at present, I think he should stay in the Outland."

"But Kaine is a real danger to *our* world," I exclaimed.

Considering Kaine's righter-than-right politics, this was a fresh limit to the word *understatement*.

"He has stolen from the Great Library once," I continued. "How can we suppose he won't do the same again? Don't we have a duty to the readers to protect them from fictionauts hellbent on--"

"Ms. Next," interrupted the Bellman, "I understand what you are saying, but I am *not* going to sanction an operation in the Outland. I'm sorry, but that is how it is going to be. He goes on the PageRunners' register and we'll set up textual sieves on every floor of the library in case he plans to come back. Out there you may do as you please; here you do as we tell you. Is that clear?"

I grew hot and angry but Miss Havisham squeezed my arm, so I remained quiet.

"Good," carried on the Bellman, consulting his clipboard. "Item four. Text Grand Central have reported several attempted incursions from the Outland. Nothing serious, but enough to generate a few ripples in the Ficto-Outland barrier. Miss Havisham, didn't you report that an Outlander company was doing some research into entering fiction?"

It was true. Goliath had been attempting entry into the BookWorld for many years but with little success; all they had



managed to do was extract a stodgy gunge from volumes one to eight of *The World of Cheese*. Uncle Mycroft had sought refuge in the Sherlock Holmes series to avoid them.

"It was called the *Something* Company," replied Havisham thoughtfully.

"Goliath," I told her. "It's called the *Goliath* Corporation."

"Goliath. That was it. I had a look round while I was retrieving Miss Next's TravelBook."

"Do you think their technology is that far advanced?" asked the Bellman.

"No. They're still a long way away. They'd been trying to send an unmanned probe into *The Listeners*, but from what I saw, with little success."

"Okay," replied the Bellman, "we'll keep an eye on them. What was their name again?"

"Goliath," I said.

He made a note.

"Item five. All of the punctuation has been stolen from the final chapter of *Ulysses*. Probably about five hundred assorted full stops, commas, apostrophes and colons." He paused for a moment. "Vern, weren't you doing some work on this?"

"Indeed," replied the squire, stepping forward and opening a notebook, "we noticed the theft two days ago. To take so much punctuation in one hit initially sounds audacious, but perhaps the thief thought no one would notice as most readers never get that far into *Ulysses*--you will recall the theft of chapter sixty-two from *Moby-Dick*, where no one noticed? Well, this theft was noted, but initial reports show that readers are regarding the lack of punctuation as not a cataclysmic error but the mark of a great genius, so we've got some breathing space."

"Are we sure it was a thief?" asked Beatrice. "Couldn't it just be grammasites?"

"I don't think so," replied Perkins, who had made book-zoology into something closely resembling a science. "Punctusauroids are pretty rare, and to make off with so many punctuations you would need a flock of several hundred. Also, I don't think they would have left the last full stop--that looks to me like a mischievous thief."

"Okay," said the Bellman, "so what are we to do?"

"The only ready market for stolen punctuation is in the Well."

"Hmm," mused the Bellman. "A Jurisfiction agent down there is about as conspicuous as a brass band at a funeral. We need someone to go undercover. Any volunteers?"

"It's my case," said Vernham Deane. "I'll go. That is--if no one thinks themselves better qualified."

There was silence.

"Looks like you're it!" enthused the Bellman, writing a note on his clipboard. "Item six. As you recall, David and Catriona Balfour were lost a few weeks back. Because there can't be much to *Kidnapped* and *Catriona* without them and Robert Louis Stevenson remains a popular author, the Council of Genres have licensed a pair of A-4 Generics to take their place. They'll be given unlimited access to all Stevenson's books, and I want you all to make them feel welcome."

There was a murmuring from the collected agents.

"Yes," said the Bellman with a resigned air, "I know they'll never be *exactly* the same, but with a bit of luck we should be okay; no one in the Outland noticed when David Copperfield was replaced, now did they?"

No one said anything.

"Good. Item seven. As you know, I am retiring in two weeks' time and the Council of Genres will need a replacement. All nominations are to be given direct to the Council for consideration.

He paused again.

"Item eight. As you all know, Text Grand Central have been working on an upgrade to the Book Operating System for the last fifty years--"

The assembled agents groaned. Clearly this was a matter of some contention. Snell had explained about the imaginotransference technology behind books in general, but I had no idea how it worked. Still don't, as a matter of fact.

"Do you know what happened when they tried to upgrade SCROLL?" said Bradshaw. "The system conflict wiped out the entire library at Alexandria--they had to torch the lot to stop it spreading."

"We knew a lot less about operating systems then, Commander," replied the Bellman in a soothing voice, "and you can rest assured that early upgrading problems have not been ignored. Many of us have reservations about the standard version of BOOK that all our beloved works are recorded in, and I think the latest upgrade to BOOK V9 is something that we should all welcome."

No one said anything. He had our attention.

"Good. Well, I could rabbit on all day but I really feel that it would be better to let WordMaster Libris, all the way from Text Grand Central, tell you the full story. Xavier?"

## 11.

### Introducing UltraWord™

First there was OralTrad, upgraded ten thousand years later by the rhyming (for easier recall) Oral TradPlus. For thousands of years this was the *only* Story Operating System and it is still in use today. The system branched in two about twenty thousand years ago; on one side with CaveDaubPro (forerunner of PaintPlus V2.3, GrecianUrn V1.2, Sculpt-Marble V1.4 and the latest, all-encompassing SuperArtisticExpression-5). The other strand, the Picto-Phonetic Storytelling Systems, started with Clay Tablet V2.1 and went through several competing systems (Wax-Tablet, Papyrus, VellumPlus) before merging into the award-winning SCROLL, which was upgraded eight times to V3.5 before being swept aside by the all new and clearly superior BOOK V1. Stable, easy to store and transport, compact and with a workable index, BOOK has led the way for nearly eighteen hundred years.

WORDMASTER XAVIER LIBRIS,

*Story Operating Systems--the Early Years*

A SMALL AND RATHER pallid-looking man took his position on the dais; he could only just see over the lectern. He wore a white, short-sleeved shirt and was almost weighed down by the number of pens in his top pocket. We all took a seat and gazed at him with interest. Ultra Word™ had been the talk of the Well for ages and everyone was keen to learn whether the rumors of its technical virtuosity were true.

"Good morning, everyone," began Libris in a nervous voice, "over the next thirty minutes I will try and explain a little about our latest operating system: BOOK Version 9, which we have code-named Ultra Word™."

There was silence as the agents mulled this over. I got the feeling that this was not just important but *really* important. Like being at the signing of a peace accord or something. Even Bradshaw, who was no fan of technology, was leaning forward and listening with interest, a frown etched on his forehead.

Libris pulled the first sheet off a flip chart. There was a picture of an old book.

"Well," he began, "when we first came up with the 'page' concept in BOOK V1, we thought we'd reached the zenith of story containment--compact, easy to read, and by using integrated PageNumber™ and Spine Title technologies, we had a system of indexing far superior to anything SCROLL could offer. Over the years--"

Here he flipped the chart over to show us varying degrees of books through the ages.

--we have been refining the BOOK system. Illustrations were the first upgrade at 1.1, standardized spelling at V3.1 and vowel and irregular verb stability in V4.2. Today we use BOOK V8.3, one of the most stable and complex imaginotransference technologies ever devised--the smooth transfer of the written word into the reader's imagination has never been faster."

He stopped for a moment. We all knew that BOOK V8.3 was excellent; apart from a few typos that crept in and the variable quality of stories--neither of which were the system's fault--it was good, very good indeed.

"Constructing the books down in the subbasements, although time-consuming, seems to work well even if it is a little chaotic."

There were murmurs of agreement from the assembled agents; it was clear that no one much liked it down there.

"But," went on Libris, "endlessly recycling old ideas might not hold the readers' attention for that much longer--the Council of Genres' own market research seems to indicate that readers are becoming bored with the sameness of plotlines."

"I think it's already happened," said the Bellman, then checked himself quickly, apologized for the interruption and let Libris carry on.

"But to understand the problem we need a bit of history. When we first devised the BOOK system eighteen hundred years ago, we designed it mainly to record events--we never thought there would be such a demand for *story*. By the tenth century story usage was so low that we still had enough new plots to last over a thousand years. By the time the seventeenth century arrived, this had lowered to six hundred--but there was still no real cause for worry. Then, something

happened that stretched the Operating System to the limit."

"Mass literacy," put in Miss Havisham.

"Exactly," replied Libris. "Demand for written stories increased exponentially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ten years before *Pamela* was published in 1740, we had enough new ideas to last four hundred years; by the time of Jane Austen this had dropped to thirty. By Dickens's time ideas were almost wholly recycled, something we have been doing on and off since the thirteenth century to stave off the inevitable. But by 1884, for all intents and purposes, we had depleted our stock of original ideas."

There was a muttering amongst the collected Jurisfiction agents.

"*Flatland*," said Bradshaw after pausing for a moment's reflection. "It was the last original idea, wasn't it?"

"Pretty much. The few leftover pieces were mopped up by the SF movement until the 1950s, but as far as *pure* ideas are concerned, 1884 was the end. We were expecting the worst--a melt-down of the whole BookWorld and a wholesale departure of readers. But that didn't happen. Against all expectations, recycled ideas were *working*."

"But isn't it the way they are told?" asked Havisham in her not-to-be-argued-with voice. "Surely the *permutations* of storytelling are endless!"

"Large perhaps, but not *infinite*, Miss Havisham. What I'm trying to say is that once all the permutations are used up, there will be nowhere for us to go. The twentieth century has seen books being written and published at an unprecedented rate--even the introduction of the Procrastination 1.3 and Writer's-Block 2.4 Outlander viruses couldn't slow the authors down. Plagiarism lawsuits are rising in the Outland; authors are beginning to write the same books. The way I see it we've got a year--possibly eighteen months--before the well of fiction runs dry."

He paused to let this sink in.

"That's why we had to go back to the drawing board and rethink the whole system."

He flipped the chart again and there were audible gasps. On the chart was written *32-Plot Story Systems*.

"As you know," he went on, "every Book Operating System has at its heart the basic eight-plot architecture we inherited from OralTrad. As we used to say, 'No one will ever need more than eight plots.' "

"Nine if you count *Coming of Age*," piped up Beatrice.

"Isn't that *Journey of Discovery*?" said Tweed.

"What's *Macbeth* then?" asked Benedict.

"*Bitter Rivalry/Revenge*, my dear," answered Havisham.

"I thought it was *Temptation*," mused Beatrice, who liked to contradict Benedict whenever possible.

"Please!" said the Bellman. "We could argue these points all night. And if you let Libris finish, you can."

The agents fell silent. I guessed this was a perennial argument.

"So the only way forward," continued Libris, "is to completely rebuild the Operating System. If we go for a thirty-two-plot basis for our stories, there will be more ideas than you or I will know what to do with. The BookWorld won't have seen such an advance since the invention of movable type."

"I'm always supportive of new technology, Mr. Libris," said Lady Cavendish kindly, "but isn't the popularity of books a fair indication of how good the current system actually is?"

"It depends what you mean by *popular*. Only thirty percent of the Outland read fiction on a regular basis--with Ultra Word™ we aim to change all that. But I'm running ahead of myself--an abundance of new ideas is only half the story. Let me carry on and tell you what other benefits the new system will give us."

Libris flipped the chart again. This time it read, *Enhanced Features*.

"Firstly, Ultra Word™ is wholly reverse compatible with all existing novels, plays and poetry. Furthermore, new books written with this system will offer bonus features that will enhance and delight."

"I say," asked Bradshaw slowly, "how do you hope to improve a book?"

"Let me give you an example," replied Libris enthusiastically. "In books that we know at present, dialogue has to be

dedicated to the people who are talking as the reader has no idea who is speaking from the words alone. This can be tricky if we want a large scene with many people talking to one another--it's very easy to get bogged down in the 'said George,' 'replied Michael,' 'added Paul' and suchlike; with the Ultra Word™ Enhanced Character Identification™, a reader will have no trouble placing who is speaking to whom without all those tedious dialogue markers. In addition, Ultra Word™ will be bundled with PlotPotPlus™, which gives the reader a potted precis if they are lost or have put the book down unfinished for a few months or more. Other options will be ReadZip™, PageGlow™ and three music tracks."

"How will the reader get these new features to work?" asked Lady Cavendish.

"There will be a preferences page inserted just after the frontispiece."

"Touch sensitive?" I asked.

"No," replied Libris excitedly, "*read* sensitive. *Ultra* words that know when they are being read. On the preferences page you can also select WordClot™, which adjusts the vocabulary to the reader--no more difficult words, or, if you *like* difficult words, you can *increase* the vocabulary complexity."

There was silence as everyone took this in.

"But to get back to your point, Lady Cavendish, a lot of people reject fiction because they find reading tedious and slow. At present levels the fastest throughput we can manage is about six words per second. With UltraWord™ we will have the technology to quadruple the uptake--something that will be very attractive to new readers--or slow ones."

"Cards on the table and all that, Libris," said Bradshaw in a loud voice. "Technology is all very well but unless we get it *absolutely* right, it could turn out to be a debacle of the highest order."

"You didn't like the ISBN positioning system, either, Commander," replied Libris, "yet book navigation has never been easier."

They stared at one another until a loud belch rent the air. It was Falstaff.

"I have lived," he said, getting to his feet with a great deal of



effort, "through much in my time; some good, some bad--I was witness to the great vowel shift and remember fond those better days when puns, fat people and foreigners were funny beyond all. I saw the novel rise and the epic poem fall, I remember when you could get blind drunk, eat yourself ill and still have change for a whore out of sixpence. I remember when water would kill you and spirits would save you; I remember--"

"Is there a point to all this?" asked Libris testily.

"Ah!" replied Falstaff, trying to figure out where he *was* going with all this. "Oh, yes. I was there for the much heralded Version-4 upgrade. 'Change the way we read forever,' quoth the Council of Genres. And what happened? The Deep Text Crash of 1842. Almost everything by Euripedes, Aeschylus and Sophocles gone forever--and we created grammasites."

"It was never proven that Version 4 created the grammasites, Sir John--"

"Come, come, Libris, have you dried your brain? I was there. I saw it. *I know*."

Libris put up his hands. "I didn't come here to argue, Sir John--I just want to stick to the facts. Anyhow, Ultra Word™ is incompatible with grammasites. Text will be locked--they'll have nothing to feed on."

"You hope, sir."

"We *know*," replied Libris firmly, adding more slowly, "Listen, Version-4 *was* a big mistake, we freely admit that--which is why we have taken so long to rigorously test UltraWord™. It is no small boast that we call it 'the ultimate reading experience.' " He paused for a moment. "It's here to stay, ladies and gentlemen--so get used to it."

He expected another attack from Falstaff, but King Hal's old friend had sat down and was shaking his head sadly. No one else added anything.

Libris took a step back and looked pointedly at the Bellman, who tingled his bell.

"Well, thank you all for listening to WordMaster Libris's presentation, and I would like to thank him for coming here today to tell us all about it."

The Bellman started to clap his hands and we joined in--with

the notable exceptions of Falstaff and Bradshaw.

"Presentation booklets will be available shortly," said the Bellman, who had suddenly begun to fidget, "individual assignments will be given out in ten minutes. And remember, let's be careful out there. That's it. Session's over."

And he tingled his bell.

Libris stepped down from the dais and melted away before Bradshaw had a chance to question him further. Miss Havisham rested her hand on his shoulder. Bradshaw was the only man to whom I had ever seen Miss Havisham show any friendliness at all. Born of a long working association, I think.

"I'm too long in the tooth for this game, Havisham, old girl," he muttered.

"You and me both, Trafford. But who'd teach the young ones?" She nodded in my direction. I hadn't been described as "young" for over a decade.

"I'm spent, Estella," said Bradshaw sadly. "No more new technology for me. I'm going back to my own book for good. At least I won't have to put up with all this nonsense in *Bradshaw of the Congo*. Good-bye, old girl."

"Good-bye, Commander--send my regards to Mrs. Bradshaw."

"Thank you. And to you, too. Miss--I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

"Thursday Next."

"Of course it is. Well, toodle-oo."

And he smiled, tipped his pith helmet and was gone.

"Dear old Bradshaw," mused Miss Havisham, "he's retired about twelve times a year since 1938. I expect we'll see him again next week."

"Ah!" muttered the Bellman as he approached. "Havisham and Next." He consulted his clipboard for a moment. "You weren't in the Outland on another speed attempt, were you?"

"Me?" replied Havisham. "Of course not!"

"Well," murmured the Bellman, not believing her for an instant, "the Council of Genres have told me that any Jurisdiction staff found abusing their privileges will be dealt with severely."

"How severely?"

"Very severely."

"They wouldn't dare," replied Havisham in the manner of an elderly duchess. "Now, what have you got for us?"

"You're chairing the *Wuthering Heights* rage-counseling session."

"I've done my six sessions. It's Falstaff's turn."

The Bellman raised an eyebrow. "Now that's not true, is it? You're only on your third. Changing counselors every week is not the best way to do it. Everyone has to take their turn, Miss Havisham, even you."

She sighed. "Very well."

"Good. Better not keep them waiting!"

The Bellman departed rapidly before Havisham could answer. She stood silently for a moment, a bit like a volcano deciding whether to erupt or not. After a few moments her eyes flicked to mine.

"Was that a smile?" she snapped.

"No, Miss Havisham," I replied, trying to hide my inner amusement that someone like her would try to counsel anyone about anything--especially rage.

"Please do tell me what you think is so very funny. I really am very keen to know."

"It was a smile," I said carefully, "of surprise."

"Was it now? Well, before you get the mistaken belief that I am somehow concerned about the feelings of such a pathetic bunch of characters, let's make it clear that I was *ordered* to do this job--same as being drafted on to Heathcliff Protection Duty. I'd sooner he were dead, personally speaking--but orders are orders. Fetch me a tea and meet me at my table."

There was a lot of excited chatter about the upgrade to UltraWord™ and I picked up snatches of conversation that ran the full gamut from condemnation to full support. Not that it mattered; Jurisdiction was only a policing agency and had little say in policy--that was all up to the higher powers at the Council of Genres. It was sort of like being back at SpecOps. I bumped into Vernham Deane at the table of refreshments.

"Well," said Vernham, helping himself to a pastry, "what do you think?"

"Bradshaw and Falstaff seem a bit put out."

"Caution is sometimes an undervalued commodity," Vernham said warily. "What does Havisham think?"

"I'm really not sure."

"Vern!" said Beatrice, who had just joined us along with Lady Cavendish. "Which plot does *Winnie-the-Pooh* have?"

"*Triumph of the Underdog*?" he suggested.

"Told you!" said Beatrice, turning to Cavendish. "'Bear with little brain triumphs over adversity.' Happy?"

"No," she replied, "it's *Journey of Discovery* all the way."

"You think every story is *Journey of Discovery*!"

"It is."

They continued to bicker as I selected a cup and saucer.

"Have you met Mrs. Bradshaw yet?" asked Deane.

I told him that I hadn't.

"When you do, don't laugh or anything."

"Why?"

"You'll see."

I poured some tea for Miss Havisham, remembering to put the milk in first.

Deane ate a canape and asked, "So how are things with you these days? Last time we met, you were having a little trouble in the Outland."

"I'm living in the Well now, as part of the Character Exchange Program."

"Really? What a lark. How's the latest Farquitt getting along?"

"Well, I *think*," I told him, always sensitive to Deane's slight shame at being a one-dimensional evil-squire figure, "the working title is *Shameless Love*."

"Sounds like a Farquitt," sighed Deane. "There'll probably be a rustic serving girl who is ravaged by someone like me, cruelly cast from the house to have her baby in the poorhouse--only to have their revenge ten chapters later."

"Well, I don't know--"

"It's not fair, you know," he said, his mood changing. "Why should I be condemned, reading after reading, to drink myself to a sad and lonely death eight pages before the end?"

"Because you're the bad guy and they *always* get their

comeuppance in Farquitt novels?"

"It's still not fair." He scowled. "I've applied for an Internal Plot Adjustment countless times but they keep turning me down. You wouldn't have a word with Miss Havisham, would you? She's on the Council of Genres Plot Adjustment subcommittee, I'm told."

"Would that be appropriate? Me talking to her, I mean?"

"Not really," he retorted, "but I'm willing to try anything. Speak to her, won't you?"

I told him I would try but decided on the face of it that I probably wouldn't. Deane seemed pleasant enough at Jurisdiction, but in *The Squire of High Potternews* he was a monster. Dying sad, lonely and forgotten was probably just right for him--in narrative terms, anyway.

I gave the tea to Miss Havisham, who abruptly broke off talking to Perkins as I approached. She gave me a grimace and vanished. I followed her to the second floor of the Great Library, where I found her in the Bronte section already with a copy of *Wuthering Heights* in her hand. I knew from Havisham's hatred of men that she probably *did* have a soft spot for Heathcliff--but I imagined it was only the treacherous marsh below Penistone crag.

"Did you meet the three witches, by the way?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied. "They told me--"

"Ignore *everything* they say. Look at the trouble they got Macbeth into."

"But they said--"

"I don't want to hear it. Claptrap and mumbo jumbo. They are troublemakers and nothing more. Understand?"

"Sure."

"Don't say 'Sure'--it's so slovenly! What's wrong with 'Yes, Miss Havisham'?"

"Yes, Miss Havisham."

"Better, I suppose. Come, we are Bronte bound!"

And so saying, we read ourselves into the pages of *Wuthering Heights*.

## 12.

### *Wuthering Heights*

*Wuthering Heights* was the only novel written by Emily Bronte, which some say is just as well, and others, a crying shame. Quite what she would have written had she lived longer is a matter of some conjecture; given Emily's strong-willed and passionate character, probably more of the same. But one thing is certain; whatever feelings are aroused in the reader by *Heights*, whether sadness for the ill-matched lovers, irritability at Catherine's petulant ways or even profound rage at how stupid Heathcliff's victims can act as they meekly line up to be abused, one thing is for sure: the evocation of a wild and windswept place that so well reflects the destructive passion of the two central characters is captured here brilliantly--and some would say, it has not been surpassed.

MILLON DE FLOSS,

*Wuthering Heights: Masterpiece or Turgid Rubbish?*

IT WAS SNOWING when we arrived and the wind whipped the flakes into something akin to a large cloud of excitable winter midges. The house was a lot smaller than I imagined but no less shabby, even under the softening cloak of snow. The shutters hung askew and only the faintest glimmer of light showed from within. It was clear we were visiting the house not in the good days of old Mr. Earnshaw but in the tenure of Mr. Heathcliff, whose barbaric hold over the house seemed to be reflected in the dour and windswept abode that we approached.

Our feet crunched on the fresh snow as we approached the front door and rapped upon the gnarled wood. It was answered, after a very long pause, by an old and sinewy man who looked at us both in turn with a sour expression before recognition dawned across his tired features and he launched into an excited gabble:

"It's bonny behavior, lurking amang t' fields, after twelve o' t' night, wi' that fahl, flaysome divil of a gipsy, Heathcliff! They think I'm blind; but I'm noan: nowt ut t' soart!--I seed young Linton boath coming and going, and I seed yah--yah gooid fur

nowt, slatternly witch!--nip up and bolt into th' house, t' minute yah heard t' maister's horse-fit clatter up t' road!"

"Never mind all that!" exclaimed Miss Havisham, to whom patience was an alien concept. "Let us in, Joseph, or you'll be feeling my boot upon your trousers!"

He grumbled but opened the door anyway. We stepped in amidst a swirl of snowflakes and tramped our feet upon the mat as the door was latched behind us.

"What did he say?" I asked as Joseph carried on muttering to himself under his breath.

"I have absolutely no idea," replied Miss Havisham, shaking the snow from her faded bridal veil, "in fact, *nobody* does. Come, you are to meet the others. For the rage-counseling session, we insist that every major character within *Heights* attends."

There was no introductory foyer or passage to the room. The front door opened into a large family sitting room where seven people were clustered around the hearth. One of the men rose politely and inclined his head in greeting. This, I learned later, was Edgar Linton, husband of Catherine Earnshaw, who sat next to him on the wooden settle and glowered meditatively into the fire. Next to them was a dissolute-looking man who appeared to be asleep, or drunk, or quite possibly both. It was clear that they were waiting for us, and equally clear from the lack of enthusiasm that counseling wasn't high on their list of priorities--or interests.

"Good evening, everyone," said Miss Havisham, "and I'd like to thank you all for attending this Jurisdiction Rage Counseling session."

She sounded almost friendly. It was quite out of character and I wondered how long she could keep it up.

"This is Miss Next, who will be observing this evening's session. Now, I want us all to join hands and create a circle of trust to welcome her to the group. Where's Heathcliff?"

"I have no idea where that scoundrel might be!" declaimed Linton angrily. "Facedown in a bog for all I care--the devil may take him and not before time!"

"Oh!" cried Catherine, withdrawing her hand from Edgar's. "Why do you hate him so? He, who loved me more than you

ever could--!"

"Now now," interrupted Havisham in a soothing tone, "remember what we said last week about name-calling? Edgar, I think you should apologize to Catherine for calling Heathcliff a scoundrel, and Catherine, you did promise last week not to mention how much you were in love with Heathcliff in front of your husband."

They grumbled their apologies.

"Heathcliff is due here any moment," said another servant, who I assumed was Nelly Dean. "His agent said he had to do some publicity. Can we not start without him?"

Miss Havisham looked at her watch. "We could get past the introductions, I suppose," she replied, obviously keen to finish this up and go home. "Perhaps we could introduce ourselves to Miss Next and sum up our feelings at the same time. Edgar, would you mind?"

"Me? Oh, very well. My name is Edgar Linton, true owner of Thrushcross Grange, and I hate and despise Heathcliff because no matter what I do, my wife, Catherine, is still in love with him."

"My name is Hindley Earnshaw," slurred the drunk, "Old Mr. Earnshaw's eldest son. I hate and despise Heathcliff because my father preferred Heathcliff to me, and later, because that scoundrel cheated me out of my birthright."

"That was very good, Hindley," said Miss Havisham, "not one single swear word. I think we're making good progress. Who's next?"

"I am Hareton Earnshaw," said a sullen-looking youth who stared at the table as he spoke and clearly resented these gatherings more than most, "son of Hindley and Frances. I hate and despise Heathcliff because he treats me as little more than a dog--and it's not as though I did anything against him, neither--he punishes me because my *father* treated him like a servant."

"I am Isabella," announced a good-looking woman, "sister of Edgar. I hate and despise Heathcliff because he lied to me, abused me, beat me and tried to kill me. Then, after I was dead, he stole our son and used him to gain control of the Linton inheritance."



"Lot of rage in *that* one," whispered Miss Havisham. "Do you see a pattern beginning to emerge?"

"That they don't much care for Heathcliff?" I whispered back.

"Does it show that badly?" she replied, a little crestfallen that her counseling didn't seem to be working as well as she'd hoped.

"I am Catherine Linton," said a confident and headstrong young girl of perhaps no more than sixteen, "daughter of Edgar and Catherine. I hate and despise Heathcliff because he kept me prisoner for five days away from my dying father to force me to marry Linton--solely to gain the title of Thrushcross Grange, the true Linton residence."

"I am Linton," announced a sickly looking child, coughing into a pocket handkerchief, "son of Heathcliff and Isabella. I hate and despise Heathcliff because he took away the only possible happiness I might have known and let me die a captive, a pawn in his struggle for ultimate revenge."

"Hear, hear," murmured Catherine Linton.

"I am Catherine Earnshaw," said the last woman, who looked around at the small group disdainfully, "and I *love* Heathcliff more than life itself!"

The group groaned audibly, several members shook their heads sadly and the younger Catherine did the "fingers down the throat" gesture.

"None of you know him the way I do, and if you had treated him with kindness instead of hatred, none of this would have happened!"

"Deceitful harlot!" yelled Hindley, leaping to his feet. "If you hadn't decided to marry Edgar for power and position, Heathcliff might have been half-reasonable--no, you brought all this on yourself, you selfish little minx!"

There was applause at this, despite Havisham's attempts to keep order.

"He is a *real* man," continued Catherine, amidst a barracking from the group, "a Byronic hero who transcends moral and social law; my love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks. Group, I *am* Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself,

but as my own being!"

Isabella thumped the table and waved her finger angrily at Catherine. "A *real* man would love and cherish the one he married," she shouted, "not use and abuse all those around him in a never-ending quest for ultimate revenge for some perceived slight of twenty years ago! So what if Hindley treated him badly? A good Christian man would forgive him and learn to live in peace!"

"Ah!" said the young Catherine, also jumping up and yelling to be heard above the uproar of accusations and pent-up frustrations. "There we have the nub of the problem. Heathcliff is as far from Christian as one can be; a devil in human form who seeks to ruin all those about him!"

"I agree with Catherine," said Linton weakly. "The man is wicked and rotten to the core!"

"Come outside and say that!" yelled the elder Catherine, brandishing a fist.

"You would have him catch a chill and die, I suppose?" replied the younger Catherine defiantly, glaring at the mother who had died giving birth to her. "It was your haughty spoilt airs that got us into this whole stupid mess in the first place! If you loved him as much as you claim, why didn't you just marry him and have done with it?"

"*Can we have some order please!*" yelled Miss Havisham so loudly that the whole group jumped. They looked a bit sheepish and sat down, grumbling slightly.

"Thank you. Now, all this yelling is *not* going to help, and if we are to do anything about the rage inside *Wuthering Heights*, we are going to have to act like civilized human beings and discuss our feelings sensibly."

"Hear, hear," said a voice from the shadows. The group fell silent and turned in the direction of the newcomer, who stepped into the light accompanied by two minders and someone who looked like his agent. The newcomer was dark, swarthy and extremely handsome. Up until meeting him I had never comprehended why the characters in *Wuthering Heights* behaved in the sometimes irrational ways that they did; but after witnessing the glowering good looks, the piercing dark eyes, I understood. Heathcliff had an almost electrifying

charisma; he could have charmed a cobra into a knot.

"Heathcliff!" cried Catherine, leaping into his arms and hugging him tightly. "Oh, Heathcliff my darling, how much I've missed you!"

"Bah!" cried Edgar, swishing his cane through the air in anger. "Put down my wife immediately or I'll swear to God I shall--"

"Shall what?" inquired Heathcliff. "You gutless popinjay! My dog has more valor in its pizzle than you possess in your entire body! And, Linton, you weakling, what did you say about me being 'wicked and rotten'?"

"Nothing," said Linton quietly.

"Mr. Heathcliff," said Miss Havisham sternly, "it doesn't pay to be late for these sessions, nor to aggravate your cocharacters."

"The devil take your sessions, Miss Havisham," he said angrily. "Who is the star of this novel? Who do the readers expect to see when they pick up this book? Who has won the Most Troubled Romantic Lead at the BookWorld Awards seventy-seven times in a row? Me. All me. Without me, *Heights* is a tediously overlong, provincial potboiler of insignificant interest. I am the star of this book and I'll do as I please, my lady, and you can take that to the Bellman, the Council, or all the way to the Great Panjandrum for all I care!"

He pulled a signed glossy photo of himself from his breast pocket and passed it to me with a wink. The odd thing was, I actually *recognized* him. He had been acting with great success in Hollywood under the name Buck Stallion, which probably explained where he got his money from; he could have bought Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights three times over on his salary.

"The Council of Genres has decreed that you *will* attend the sessions, Heathcliff," said Havisham coldly. "If this book is to survive, we have to control the emotions within it; as it is, the novel is three times more barbaric than when first penned--left to its own devices it won't be long before murder and mayhem start to take over completely--remember what happened to that once gentle comedy of manners *Titus Andronicus*? It's now the daftest, most cannibalistic blood fest in the whole of

Shakespeare. *Heights* will go the same way unless you can all somehow contain your anger and resentment!"

"I don't want to be made into a pie!" moaned Linton.

"Brave speech," replied Heathcliff sardonically, "very brave." He leaned closer to Miss Havisham, who stood her ground defiantly. "Let me 'share' something with your little group. *Wuthering Heights* and all who live within her may go to the devil for all I care. It has served its purpose as I honed the delicate art of treachery and revenge--but I'm now bigger than this book and bigger than all of you. There are better novels waiting for me out there, that know how to properly service a character of my depth!"

The assembled characters gasped as this new intelligence sank in. Without Heathcliff there would be no book--and in consequence, none of them, either.

"You wouldn't make it into *Spot's Birthday* without the Council's permission," growled Havisham. "Try and leave *Heights* and we'll make make you wish you'd never been written!"

Heathcliff laughed. "Nonsense! The Council has urgent need of characters such as I; leaving me stuck in the classics where I am only ever read by bored English students is a waste of one of the finest romantic leads ever written. Mark my words, the Council will do whatever it takes to attract a greater readership--a transfer will not be opposed by them or anyone else, I can assure you of *that*!"

"What about us?" wailed Linton, coughing and on the verge of tears. "We'll be reduced to text!"

"Best thing for all of you!" growled Heathcliff. "And I'll be there at the shoreline, ready to rejoice at your last strangled cry as you dip beneath the waves!"

"And me?" asked Catherine.

"You will come with me." Heathcliff smiled, softening. "You and I will live again in a modern novel, without all these trappings of Victorian rectitude. I thought we could reside in a spy thriller somewhere, go shopping at Ikea and have a boxer puppy with one ear that goes down--"

There was a loud detonation and the front door exploded inwards in a cloud of wood splinters and dust. Havisham

pushed Heathcliff to the ground and laid herself across him, yelling, "Take cover!"

She fired her small pistol at a masked man who jumped through the smoking doorway firing a machine gun. Havisham's bullet struck home and the figure crumpled in a heap. One of Heathcliff's two minders took rounds in the neck and chest from the first assailant, but the second minder pulled out his own submachine gun and pressed himself against the wall. Linton fainted on the spot, quickly followed by Isabella and Edgar. At least it stopped them screaming. I drew my gun and fired along with the minder and Havisham as another masked assassin came in the door; we got him, but one of his bullets caught the second bodyguard in the head, and he dropped lifeless to the flags.

I crawled across to Havisham and heard Heathcliff whimper, "Help me! Don't let them kill me! I don't want to die!"

"Shut up!" hissed Havisham, and Heathcliff was instantly quiet. I looked around. His agent was cowering under a briefcase, and the rest of the cast were hiding beneath the oak table. There was a pause.

"What's going on?" I hissed.

"ProCath attack," murmured Havisham, reloading her pistol in the sudden quiet, "support of the young Catherine and hatred of Heathcliff runs deep in the BookWorld; usually its only a lone gunman--I've never seen anything this well planned before. I'm going to jump out with Heathcliff; I'll be back for you straightaway."

She mumbled a few words but nothing happened. She tried them again but still nothing.

"The devil take them!" she muttered, pulling her mobilefootnoterphone from the folds of her wedding dress. "They must be using a textual sieve."

"What's a textual sieve?"

"I don't know--it's never fully explained."

She looked at the mobilefootnoterphone and tossed it aside. "Blast! No signal. Where's the nearest footnoterphone?"

"In the kitchen," replied Nelly Dean, "next to the breadbasket."

"We have to get word to the Bellman. Thursday, I want you

to go to the kitchen--"

But she never got to finish her sentence because a barrage of machine-gun fire struck the house, decimating the windows and shutters. The curtains danced as they were shredded, the plaster erupting off the wall as the shots slammed into it. We kept our heads down as Catherine screamed, Linton woke up only to faint again, Hindley took a swig from a hip flask and Heathcliff convulsed with fear beneath us. After about five minutes the firing stopped. Dust hung lazily in the air and we were covered with plaster, shards of glass and wood chips.

"Havisham!" came a subdued voice on a bullhorn from outside. "We wish you no harm! Just surrender Heathcliff and we'll leave you alone!"

"No!" cried the older Catherine, who had crawled across to us and was trying to clasp Heathcliff's head in her hands. "Heathcliff, don't leave me!"

"I have no intention of doing any such thing," he said in a muffled voice, nose pressed hard into the flags by Havisham's weight. "Havisham, I hope you remember your orders."

"Send out Heathcliff and we will spare you and your apprentice!" yelled the bullhorn again. "Stand in our way and you'll both be terminated!"

"Do they mean it?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," replied Havisham grimly. "A group of ProCaths attempted to hijack *Madame Bovary* last year to force the Council to relinquish Heathcliff."

"What happened?"

"The ones who survived were reduced to text, but it hasn't stopped the ProCath movement. Do you think you can get to the footnoterphone?"

"Sure--I mean, yes, Miss Havisham."

I crawled off towards the kitchen.

"We'll give you two minutes," said the voice into the bullhorn again. "After that, we're coming in."

"I have a better deal," yelled Havisham.

There was a pause.

"And that is?" came the voice on the bullhorn.

"Leave now and I will be merciful when I find you."

"I think," replied the voice on the bullhorn, "that we'll stick

to my plan. You have one minute forty-five seconds."

I reached the doorway of the kitchen, which had been as devastated as the living room. Flour and beans from broken storage jars were strewn across the floor, and a flurry of snowflakes was blowing in through the windows. I found the footnoterphone; it had been riddled with machine-gun fire. I cursed and went to look out the pantry window. I could see two of them, sitting in the snow, weapons ready. I dashed back to Havisham.

"Well?"

"Footnoterphone destroyed, and two ProCaths at the back that I could see."

"And at least three at the front," she added, snapping her pistol shut. "I'm open to suggestions."

"How about giving them Heathcliff?" came a chorus of voices.

"*Other* than that?"

"I can try and get behind them," I muttered, "if you give me covering fire--"

I was interrupted by an unearthly cry of terror from outside, followed by a sort of crunching noise, then another cry and sporadic machine-gun fire. There was a large thump and another shot, then a shout, then the ProCaths at the back started to open fire. But not at the house--at some unseen menace. We heard two more cries of terror, a few more gunshots, a slow tearing noise, then silence.

I got up and peered cautiously from the door. There was nothing outside except the soft snow, disturbed occasionally by dinner-plate-sized footprints.

We found only one complete body, tossed onto the roof of the pigsty.

"Look at this," said Miss Havisham from where she was standing at the corner of the barn. It looked as though one of the ProCaths had been stationed there by the large quantity of spent cartridges, but what Havisham was actually pointing out were the four freshly dug grooves in the masonry, spaced about six inches apart.

"It looks like . . . *claw marks*," I murmured.

"Must have caught the corner of the barn midswipe," replied

Miss Havisham thoughtfully, peering closer at the damaged stonework.

"It was Big Martin," I said with a shiver. "Some of his friends had me pegged for dinner down on the twenty-second floor yesterday."

"Then we should be glad Big Martin got to this bunch first. Mind you, I've heard rumors that the Big M was into classics--he might have been doing us a favor."

We turned and walked through the snow back to the house.

"Who is Big Martin?" I asked.

"Less of a *who* and more of a *what*," replied Miss Havisham, tramping her feet on the doorstep to get rid of the snow. "Even the Glatissant is nervous of Big Martin. He's a law unto himself. I'd watch your back and eat plenty of cashews."

"Cashews?"

"Big Martin *loathes* them. Unusually for a Book Fiend he has a sense of smell--one whiff and he's off."

"I'll remember that."

We returned to where the cast of *Wuthering Heights* were dusting themselves down. Joseph was muttering incomprehensibly to himself and trying to block the windows up with blankets.

"Well," said Miss Havisham, clapping her hands together, "that was an exciting session, wasn't it?"

"I am still leaving this appalling book," retorted Heathcliff, who was back on full obnoxious form again.

"No you're *not*," replied Havisham.

"You just try and stop--"

Havisham, who was fed up with pussyfooting around and hated men like Heathcliff with a vengeance, grasped him by the collar and pinned his head to the table with her pistol pressed painfully into his neck.

"Listen here," she said, her voice quavering with anger, "to me, you are worthless scum. Thank your lucky stars I am loyal to Jurisfiction. Many others in my place would have handed you over. I could kill you now and no one would be any the wiser."

Heathcliff looked at me imploringly.

"I was outside when I heard the shot," I told him.



"So were we!" exclaimed the rest of the cast eagerly, excepting Catherine Earnshaw, who simply scowled.

"Perhaps I *should* do it!" growled Havisham again. "Perhaps it would be a mercy. I could make it look like an accident!"

"No!" cried Heathcliff in a contrite tone. "I've changed my mind. I'm going to stay right here and just be plain old Mr. Heathcliff for ever and ever."

Havisham slowly released her grasp. "Right," she said, switching her pistol to *safe* and regaining her breath, "I think that pretty much concludes this session of Jurisfiction rage counseling. What did we learn?"

The cocharacters all stared at her, dumbstruck.

"Good. Same time next week, everyone?"

## 14.

### Educating the Generics

Generics are the chameleons of the Well. In general they were trained to do specific jobs but could be upgraded if the need arose. Occasionally a Generic would jump up spontaneously within the grade, but to jump from one grade to another without external help, they said, was impossible. From what I would learn, *impossible* was a word that should not be bandied about the Well without due thought--imagination being what it is, anything could happen--and generally did.

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*The Jurisfiction Chronicles*

**B**IG MARTIN HAD made a mess of the ProCath fanatics who had attacked us. The leader was identified by his dental records--why he had them on him, no one was quite sure. He had been a D-3 crew member in *On the Beach* and was replaced within twenty-four hours. *Wuthering Heights* was repaired within a few lines, and because Havisham had been holding the rage-counseling session *between* chapters, no one reading the book noticed anything. In fact, the only evidence of the attack now to be seen in the book was Hareton's shotgun, which exploded accidentally in chapter 32, most likely as a result of a ricocheting bullet damaging the latching mechanism.

"How was your day today?" asked Gran as I walked back on board the Sunderland.

"Very . . . *expositional* to begin with," I said, falling into a sofa and tickling Pickwick, who had come over all serious and matronly, "but it ended quite dramatically."

"Did you have to be rescued again?"

"Yes and no."

"The first few days in a new job are always a bit shaky," said Gran. "Why do you have to work for Jurisfiction anyway?"

"It was part of the Exchange Program deal."

"Oh, yes," she replied. "Would you like me to make you an

omelette?"

"Anything."

"Right. I'll need you to crack the eggs and mix them and get me down the saucepan and . . ."

I heaved myself up and went through to the small galley, where the fridge was full of food, as always.

"Where's ibb and obb?" I asked.

"Out, I think," replied Gran. "Would you make us both a cup of tea while you're up?"

"Sure. I still can't remember Landen's second name, Gran--I've been trying all day."

Gran came into the galley and sat on a kitchen stool, which happened to be right in the way of everything. She smelt of sherry, but for the life of me I didn't know where she hid it.

"But you remember what he looks like?"

I stopped what I was doing and stared out of the kitchen porthole.

"Yes," I replied slowly, "every line, every mole, every expression--but I still remember him dying in the Crimea."

"That *never* happened, my dear. But the fact--I should use a bigger bowl if I were you--you can remember his features proves he's not gone any more than yesterday. I should use butter and not oil; and if you have any mushrooms, you could chop them up with a bit of onion and bacon--do you have any bacon?"

"Probably. You still didn't tell me how you managed to find your way here, Gran."

"That's easily explained. Tell me, did you manage to get a list of the duller books you could find?"

Granny Next was 108 years old and was convinced that she couldn't die until she had read the ten most boring classics. On an earlier occasion I had suggested *Fairie Queene*, *Paradise Lost*, *Ivanhoe*, *Moby-Dick*, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, *Pamela* and *A Pilgrim's Progress*. She had read them all and many others but was still with us. Trouble is, "boring" is about as hard to quantify as "pretty," so I really had to think of the ten books that *she* would find most boring.

"What about *Silas Marner*?"

"Only boring in parts--like *Hard Times*. You're going to have

to do a little better than that--and if I were you, I'd use a bigger pan--but on a lower heat."

"Right," I said, beginning to get annoyed, "perhaps you'd like to cook? You've done most of the work so far."

"No, no," replied Gran, completely unfazed, "you're doing fine."

There was a commotion at the door and Ibb came in, followed closely by Obb.

"Congratulations!" I called out.

"What for?" asked Ibb, who no longer looked identical to Obb. For a start, Obb was at least four inches taller and its hair was darker than Ibb's, which was beginning to go blond.

"For becoming capitalized."

"Oh, yes," enthused Ibb, "it's amazing what a day at St. Tabularasa's will do for one. Tomorrow we'll finish our gender training, and by the end of the week we'll be streamed into character groups."

"I want to be a male mentor figure," said Obb. "Our tutor said that sometimes we can have a choice of what we do and where we go. Are you making supper?"

"No," I replied, testing their sarcasm response, "I'm giving my pet egg heat therapy."

Ibb laughed--which was a good sign, I thought--and went off with Obb to practice whimsical retorts in case either of them was given a posting as a humorous sidekick.

"Teenagers," said Granny Next. "Tch. I better make it a bigger omelette. Take over, would you? I'm going to have a rest."

We all sat down to eat twenty minutes later. Obb had brushed its hair into a parting and Ibb was wearing one of Gran's gingham dresses.

"Hoping to be female?" I asked, passing Ibb a plate.

"Yes," replied Ibb, "but not one like you. I'd like to be more feminine and a bit hopeless--the sort that screams a lot when they get into trouble and has to be rescued."

"Really?" I asked, handing Gran the salad. "Why?"

Ibb shrugged. "I don't know. I just like the idea of being rescued a lot, that's all--being carried off in big, strong arms

sort of . . . *appeals*. I thought I could have the plot explained to me a lot, too--but I should have a few good lines of my own, be quite vulnerable, yet end up saving the day due to a sudden flash of idiot savant brilliance."

"I think you'll have no trouble getting a placement," I sighed, "but you seem quite specific--have you used someone in particular as a model?"

"Her!" exclaimed Ibb, drawing out a much thumbed Outland copy of *Silverscreen* from beneath the table. On the cover was none other than Lola Vavoom, being interviewed for the umpteenth time about her husbands, her denial of any cosmetic surgery and her latest film--usually in that order.

"Gran!" I said sternly. "Did you give Ibb that magazine?"

"Well--!"

"You *know* how impressionable Generics can be! Why didn't you give her a magazine with Jenny Gudgeon in it? She plays proper women--and can act, too."

"Have you seen Ms. Vavoom in *My Sister Kept Geese*?" replied Gran indignantly. "I think you'd be surprised--she shows considerable range."

I thought about Cordelia Flakk and her producer friend Harry Flex wanting Lola to play me in a film. The idea was too awful to contemplate.

"You were going to tell us about subtext," said Obb, helping itself to more salad.

"Oh, yes," I replied, a distraction from Vavoom a welcome break. "Subtext is the implied action behind the written word. Text tells the reader what the characters *say and do* but subtext tells us what they *mean and feel*. The wonderful thing about subtext is that it is common grammar, written in human experience--you can't understand it without a good working knowledge of people and how they interact. Got it?"

Ibb and Obb looked at one another. "No."

"Okay, let me give you a simple example. At a party, a man gives a woman a drink and she takes it without answering. What's going on?"

"She isn't very polite?" suggested Ibb.

"Perhaps," I replied, "but I was really looking for some sort of clue as to their relationship."

Obb scratched its head and said, "She can't speak because, er, she lost her tongue in an industrial accident due to his negligence?"

"You're trying too hard. For what reason would someone not *necessarily* say 'thank you' for something?"

"Because," said Ibb slowly, "they know one another?"

"Good. Being handed a drink at a party by your wife, husband, girlfriend or partner, you would as likely as not just take it; if it was from a host to a guest, then you would thank them. Here's another: there is a couple walking down the road--and she is walking eight paces behind him."

"He has longer legs?" suggested Ibb.

"No."

"They've broken down?"

"They've had an argument," said Obb excitedly, "and they live nearby or they would be taking their car."

"Could be," I responded. "Subtext tells you lots of things. Ibb, did you take the last piece of chocolate from the fridge?"

There was a pause. "No."

"Well, because you paused, I know pretty confidently that you did."

"Oh!" said Ibb. "I'll remember *that*."

There was a knock at the door.

I opened it to reveal Mary's ex-beau Arnold looking very dapper in a suit and holding a small bunch of flowers. Before he had time to open his mouth, I had closed the door again.

"Ah!" I said, turning to Ibb and Obb. "This is a good opportunity to study subtext. See if you can figure out what is going on *behind* our words--and Ibb, *please* don't feed Pickwick at the table."

I opened the door again, and Arnold, who had started to slink off, came running back.

"Oh!" he said with mock surprise. "Mary not back yet?"

"No. In fact, she probably won't be back for some time. Can I take a message?"

And I closed the door on his face again.

"Okay," I said to Ibb and Obb, "what do you think is going on?"

"He's looking for Mary?" suggested Ibb.

"But he *knows* she's gone away," said Obb. "He must be coming to speak to *you*, Thursday."

"Why?"

"For a date?"

"Good. What am I saying to him?"

Ibb and Obb thought hard. "If you didn't want to see him, you'd have told him to go away, so you might be the tiniest bit interested."

"Excellent!" I told them. "Let's see what happens next."

I opened the door again to a confused-looking Arnold, who broke into a wide smile.

"Well," he said, "no message for Mary--it's just--we had planned to see Willow Lodge and the Limes this evening . . ."

I turned to Ibb and Obb, who shook their heads. They didn't believe it, either.

"Well," said Arnold slowly, ". . . perhaps *you* might like to come with me to the concert?"

I shut the door again.

"He *pretended* to have the idea about going to see Willow Lodge tonight," said Ibb slowly and more confidently, "when in fact I think he had it planned all along that way. I think he fancies you big time."

I opened the door again.

"I'm sorry, no," I told him hastily, "happily married."

"It's not a date," exclaimed Arnold quickly, "just a lift to a concert. Here, take the ticket anyway. I've no one else to give it to; if you don't want to go, just bin it."

I shut the door again.

"Ibb's wrong," said Obb, "he *really* fancies you--but he's blown it by being *too* desperate--it would be hard for you to respect someone who would almost start begging."

"Not bad," I replied, "let's see how it turns out."

I opened the door again and stared into Arnold's earnest eyes.

"You miss her, don't you?"

"Miss who?" asked Arnold, seemingly nonchalant.

"Denial of love!" yelled Ibb and Obb from behind me. "He doesn't really fancy you at all--he's in love with Mary and wants a date on the rebound!"

Arnold looked suspicious. "What's going on?"

"Subtext classes," I explained, "sorry for being rude. Do you want to come in for a coffee?"

"Well, I should be going really--"

"Playing hard to get!" hooted Ibb, and Obb added quickly, "The balance of power has tipped in his favor because you've been rude to him with all that door nonsense, and now you're going to have to *insist* that he come in for coffee, even if that means being nicer to him than you originally intended!"

"Are they always like this?" inquired Arnold, stepping inside.

"They learn quick," I observed. "That's Ibb and that's Obb. Ibb and Obb, this is Arnold."

"Hullo!" said Arnold, thinking for a moment. "Do you Generics want to go and see Willow Lodge and the Limes?"

They looked at one another for a moment, realized they were sitting just that little bit too close and moved apart.

"Do you?" said Ibb.

"Well, only if you want to--"

"I'm easy--it's your decision."

"Well y-es, I'd really like to."

"Then let's go--unless you've made other plans--?"

"No, no, I haven't."

They got up, took the tickets from Arnold and were out the door in a flash.

I laughed and went though to the galley.

"Who's the elderly woman?" asked Arnold.

"It's my Gran," I replied, switching on the kettle and getting out the coffee.

"Is she--you know?"

"Goodness me, no! She's only asleep. She's one hundred and eight."

"Really? Why is she dressed in this dreadful blue gingham?"

"Has been for as long as I can remember. She came here to make sure I didn't forget my husband. Sorry. That makes me sound as though I'm laboring the point, doesn't it?"

"Listen, don't worry. I didn't mean to come over all romantic just then. But, Mary, well, she's quite something, you know--and I'm not just in love with her because I was written that way. This one's for real. Like Nelson and Emma, Bogart and



Bacall--"

"Finch Hatton and Blixen. Yes, I know. I've been there."

"Denys was in love with Baron Blixen?"

"Karen Blixen."

"Oh."

He sat down and I placed a coffee in front of him.

"So, tell me about your husband."

"Hah!" I said, smiling. "You don't want me to bore you about Landen."

"It's not boring. You listen to me when I hark on about Mary."

I stirred my coffee absently, running through my memories of Landen to make sure they were all there. Gran mumbled something about lobsters in her sleep.

"It must have been a hard decision to come and hide out here," said Arnold quietly. "I don't imagine Thursdays generally do that sort of thing."

"You're right, they don't. But sometimes falling back and regrouping is not the same as running away."

"Tactical withdrawal?"

"Right. What would you do to get together with Mary again?"

"Anything."

"And I with Landen. I *will* get him back--just not quite yet. But the strange thing is," I added slightly wistfully, "when he comes back, he won't even know he'd been gone--it's not as though he's waiting for me to reactualize him."

We chatted for about an hour. Arnold told me about the Well and I talked about the Outland. He was just trying to get me to repeat "irrelevant benevolent elephant" when Gran woke up with a yell shouting, "The French! The French!" and had to be calmed down with a glass of warm whiskey before I put her to bed.

"I'd better be going," said Arnold. "Mind if I drop round again?"

"Not at all," I replied. "That would be nice."

I went to bed after that and was still awake when Ibb and Obb returned from the concert. They were giggling and made a

noisy cup of tea before retiring. I lay back and tried to sleep, hoping that I would dream of being back at our house, the one that Landen and I shared when we were married. Failing that, on holiday somewhere. Failing *that*, when we first met--and if that wasn't available, an argument--and lastly, anything with Landen in it at all. Aornis had other ideas.

## 15.

### Landen Parke-Somebody

Before Aornis Hades, the existence of mnemonomorphs was suspected only to SO-5, who, through deceit, idleness or forgetfulness, never told anyone else. The files on mnemonomorphs are kept in eight different locations and updated automatically between each location every week. An ability to control entropy does not necessarily go with the skill to alter memories; indeed, Aornis has been the only entity (thus far that we know about) who can do such a thing. As Miss Next demonstrated between 1986-87, mnemonomorphs are not without their Achilles' heel. There is one question we would all like answered about Aornis, however, since no physical evidence of her remains: Was she real, or just a bad memory?

BLAKE LAMME, (EX-SO-5)

*Remember Them? A Study of Mnemonomorphs*

**D**EAR, SWEET THURSDAY!" muttered a patronizing voice that was chillingly familiar.

I opened my eyes. I was on the roof of Thornfield Hall, Rochester's house in *Jane Eyre*. It was the time and place of my final showdown with Acheron Hades. The old house was on fire and I could feel the roof growing hot beneath my feet. I coughed in the smoke and felt my eyes begin to smart. Next to me was Edward Rochester, cradling a badly wounded hand. Acheron had already thrown Rochester's poor wife, Bertha, over the parapet and was now preparing to finish us both off.

"Sweet madness, eh?" Acheron laughed. "Jane is with her cousins; the narrative is with her. And I have the manual!" He waved it at me, deposited it in his pocket and picked up his gun. "Who's first?"

I ignored Hades and looked around. The patronizing "Dear, sweet Thursday!" voice had not been his--it had belonged to Aornis. She was wearing the same designer clothes as when I last saw her--she was only my memory of her, after all.

"Hey!" said Acheron. "I'm talking to you!"

I turned and dutifully fired, and Hades caught the approaching bullet--as he had when this had happened for

real. He opened his fist; the slug was flattened into a small lead disk. He smiled and a shower of sparks flew up behind him.

But I wasn't so interested in Acheron this time around.

"Aornis!" I shouted. "Show yourself, coward!"

"No coward, I!" said Aornis, stepping from behind a large chimney piece.

"What are you doing to me?" I demanded angrily, pointing my gun at her. She didn't seem to be in the least put out--in fact, she seemed more concerned with preventing the dirt from the roof soiling her suede shoes.

"Welcome"--she laughed--"to the museum of your mind!"

The roof at Thornfield vanished and was replaced by the interior of the abandoned church where Spike and I were about to do battle with the Supreme Evil Being that was stuck in his head. It had happened for real a few weeks ago; the memories were still fresh--it was all chillingly lifelike.

"I am the curator in this museum," said Aornis as we moved again, to the dining room at home when I was eight, a small girl with pigtails and as precocious as they come. My father--before his eradication, of course--was carving the roast and telling me that if I kept on being a nuisance, I would be made to go to my room.

"Familiar to you?" asked Aornis. "I can call on any exhibit I want. Do you remember this?"

And we were back on the banks of the Thames, during my father's abortive attempt to rescue the two-year-old Landen. I felt the fear, the hopelessness, squeezing my chest so tight I could barely breathe. I sobbed.

"I can run it again if you want to. I can run it for you every night *forever*. Or I can delete it completely. How about this one?"

Night came on and we were in the area of Swindon that young couples go with their cars to get a bit of privacy. I had come here with Darren, a *highly* unlikely infatuation kindled in the furnace of parental disapproval. He loomed close to me in an amorous embrace in the back of his Morris 8. I was seventeen and impulsive--Darren was eighteen and repulsive. I could smell his beery breath and a postadolescent odor that

was so strong you could have grabbed the air and wrung the stench from it with your bare hands. I could see Aornis outside the car, grinning at me, and through the labored panting of Darren, I screamed.

"But this isn't the *worst* place we could go." Aornis grinned through the window. "We can go back to the Crimea and unlock memories that have been too terrifying even for you. The suppressed memories, the ones you block out to let you carry on the day."

"No, Aornis, not the charge--!"

But there we were, in the last place I wanted to be, driving my APC into the massed field artillery of the Russian army that August afternoon in 1973. Of the eighty-four APCs and light tanks that advanced into the Russian guns, only two vehicles returned. Out of the 534 soldiers involved, 51 survived.

It was the moment before the barrage began. My CO, Major Phelps, was riding on the outside as he liked to do, foolhardy idiot that he was, and to my left and right I could see the other armored vehicles throwing up large swathes of summer dust from the parched land. We could be seen for miles. The first salvo was so unexpected that I thought the munitions in a light tank had simply ignited by accident; the whine of a near miss made me realize that it hadn't. I changed direction instantly and started to zigzag. I looked to Phelps for orders, but he was slumped in the hatch; he had lost the lower part of his arm and was unconscious. The barrage was so intense that it became a single rumbling growl, the pressure waves thumping the APC so hard that it was all I could do to keep my hands on the controls.

I read the official report two years later. Forty-two guns had been trained on us from a thousand yards, and they had expended 387 rounds of high-explosive shells--about four to each vehicle. It had been like shooting fish in a barrel.

Sergeant Tozer took command and ordered me to an APC that had lost its tracks and been thrown upside down. I parked behind the wrecked carrier as Tozer and the squad jumped out to retrieve the wounded.

"But what were you *really* thinking about?" asked Aornis,

who was beside me in the carrier, looking disdainfully at the dust and oil.

"Escape," I said. "I was terrified. We all were."

"Next!" yelled Tozer. "Stop talking to Aornis and take us to the next APC!"

I pulled away as another explosion went off. I saw a turret whirling through the air, a pair of legs dangling from beneath it.

I drove to the next APC, the shrapnel hitting our carrier almost continuously like hail on a tin roof. The survivors were firing impotently back with their rifles; it wasn't looking good. The APC was filled with the wounded, and as I turned round, something hit the carrier a glancing blow. It was a dud; it had struck us obliquely and bounced off--I would see the yard-long gouge in the armor plate the following day. Within a hundred yards we were in relative safety as the dust and smoke screened our retreat; pretty soon we had passed the forward command post, where all the officers were shouting into their field telephones, and were on to the dressing areas beyond. Even though I knew this was a dream, the fear felt as real as it had on the day, and tears of frustration welled up inside me. I thought Aornis would carry on with this memory for the return run to the barrage, but there was clearly a technique behind her barbaric game. In a blink we were back on the roof at Thornfield Hall.

Acheron was looking at me with a triumphant expression and carried on where he had left off:

"It may come as some consolation that I planned to bestow upon you the honor of becoming Felix9--Who are you?"

He was looking at Aornis.

"Aornis," she said shyly.

Acheron gave a rare smile and lowered his gun.

"Aornis?" he echoed. "*Little* Aornis?" She nodded and ran across to give him a hug.

"My goodness!" he said, looking her over carefully. "How you have grown! Last time I saw you, you were this high and had barely even *started* torturing animals. Tell me, did you follow us into the family business or did you flunk out like that loser Styx?"

"I'm a mnemonomorph!" she said proudly, eager for her sibling's approval.

"Of course! I should have guessed. We're in that Next woman's memories right now, aren't we?"

She nodded enthusiastically.

"Attagirl! Tell me, did she actually kill me? I'm only here as the *memory* of me in her mind, after all."

"I'm afraid so," said Aornis glumly. "She killed you well and good."

"By using treachery? Did I die a Hades?"

"I'm afraid not--it was a noble victory."

"Bitch!"

"Seconded. But I'll have the revenge you deserve, dear brother, you can be sure of that."

A family reunion like this should have been heartwarming, but I can't say I was moved. Still, at least it kept us away from the Crimea.

"Mother's very upset with you," said Aornis, who had the Hades penchant for straight talking.

"Why?"

"Why do you think? You murdered Styx."

"Styx was a fool and he brought shame on the Hades family. If father was still alive, he would have done the job himself."

"Well, Mother was very upset about it and I think you should apologize."

"Okay, next time--wait a moment, I'm dead--I can't apologize to anyone. *You* apologize for me."

"I'm a mnemonomorph, remember--and this is only me as a mindworm; a sort of satellite persona, if you like. Listen, if I knew where Thursday was, she'd be dead already. No, when I can report back to Aornis proper, this is what we'll do--"

"Psssst!" said a voice close to my ear. It was Granny Next.

"Gran! Am I glad to see you!"

"C'mon, while Aornis is distracted."

Gran took my hand and led me across the roof to the window, where we entered the building. But instead of being in the burning remains of Thornfield Hall, we were on the sidelines of a croquet match. Not *any* croquet match; it was a Croquet Federation Final--a SuperHoop. I used to play croquet

quite seriously until SpecOps work absorbed all my free time. The two teams were in their body armor, leaning on their willow mallets and discussing strategy during a time-out.

"Okay," said Aubrey Jambe, who was wearing the captain's sweater, "Biffo is going to take the red ball from the forty-yard line over the rhododendron bushes, past the Italian sunken garden and into a close position to hoop five. Spike, you'll take it from there and croquet their yellow--Stig will defend you. George, I want you to mark their number five. He's a neanderthal, so you're going to have to use any tricks you can. Smudger, you're going to foul the duchess--when the vicar gives you the red card, I'm calling in Thursday. Yes?"

They all looked at me. I was in body armor, too. I was a substitute. A croquet mallet was slung round my wrist with a lanyard and I was holding a helmet.

"Thursday?" repeated Aubrey. "Are you okay? You look like you're in a dreamworld!"

"I'm fine," I said slowly. "I'll wait for your command."

"Good."

A horn went off, indicating the time-out was over. I looked up at the scoreboard. Swindon was losing, 12 hoops to 21.

"Gran," I said slowly, watching the team run out to continue play, "I don't remember this."

"Of course not!" she said as though I were a fool. "This is one of *mine*. Aornis will never find us here."

"Wait a moment. How can I be dreaming with *your* memories?"

"Tch tch," she scolded, "so many questions! It will all be explained in due course. Now, do you want to go into some of that deep, dreamless sleep and get some rest?"

"Please!"

"Good. Aornis will not bother you again tonight--I shall watch over you."

Gran approached a burly croquet player who only had one ear. After saying a few words, she pointed at me. I looked around at the stadium. It was the Swindon croquet stadium, yet somehow different. Behind me at the dignitaries box I was surprised to see Yorrick Kaine speaking to one of his assistants. Next to him was President Formby, who gave me a



smile and a wave. I turned away, my eyes looking into the crowd and falling upon the one person that I *did* want to see. It was Landen, and he was bouncing a young child on his lap.

"Landen!" I shouted, but a cheer went up from the crowd and I was drowned out. But he *did* see me and smiled. He held the infant's hand and made it wave, too. Gran tugged my shoulder pad to get my attention.

"Gran," I said, "it's Lan--"

And then the mallet struck my head. Blackness and oblivion. As usual, just when I got to the good bit.

## 16.

### Captain Nemo

**Wemmick's Stores:** To enable Jurisfiction agents to travel easily and undetected within fiction, Wemmick's Stores was built within the lobby of the Great Library. The stores have an almost unlimited inventory as Mr. Wemmick is permitted to create whatever he needs using a small Imagino TransferenceDevice licensed by Text Grand Central. To reduce pilfering by Jurisfiction staff, all items checked out must be checked in again, where they are promptly reduced to text.

CAT FORMERLY KNOWN AS CHESHIRE,  
*Guide to the Great Library*

I WOKE LATE THE following morning. My bed was next to the porthole so I rolled over, doubled up a pillow and gazed out at the sun sparkling upon the surface of the lake. I could hear the gentle slap of the water against the flying boat's hull, and it gave me a sense of ease and inner peace that ten years of SpecOps' finest stressperts couldn't bully into you.

I got up slowly and felt woozy all of a sudden. The room spun around and I felt hot. After a brief and unpleasant visit to the loo, I felt a bit better and went downstairs.

I made myself some toast, as it helped the nausea, and caught sight of myself in the chrome toaster. I looked dreadful, and I was holding up the toaster and sticking my tongue out, trying to see what it looked like, when the Generics walked in.

"What on earth are you doing?" asked Ibb.

"Nothing," I replied, hurriedly replacing the toaster. "Off to college?"

They both nodded. I noticed that they'd not only made their own lunch but actually cleared away after themselves. A certain sensitivity to others is a good sign in a Generic. It shows personality.

"Do you know where Gran is?" I asked.

"She said she was off to the Medici court for a few days," replied Obb. "She left you that note."

I found the note on the counter and picked it up, studying

the one-word message with slight confusion.

"We'll be back at five," announced Ibb. "Do you need anything?"

"What, er--no," I said, reading Gran's note again. "See you then."

I made some more toast and continued with the multiple-choice test. After a half hour battling through such questions as *Which book does Sam Weller the Bootboy reside in?* and *Who said, "When she appeared, it was as though spring had finally arrived after a miserable winter"?* I stopped and looked at Gran's note for the tenth time. It was confusing. Written in a small and shaky hand, the note consisted of a single word: REMEMBER!

"Remember *what?*" I muttered to myself, and went for a walk.

I strolled down the banks of the lake, taking a path through a grove of birches that grew by the water's edge. I ducked under the low branches and followed my nose towards the odd assortment of vessels that were moored next to the old Sunderland. The first was a converted naval pinnace, her decks covered in plastic and in a constant state of conservation. Beyond this was a Humber lighter, abandoned and sunk at its moorings. As I walked on, a sudden screech of demonic laughter was followed by a peal of thunder and the smell of brimstone borne on a gust of icy wind. I blinked and coughed as thick green smoke momentarily enveloped me; when it had cleared, I was no longer alone. Three old hags with hooked chins and mottled complexions danced and cackled in front of me, rubbing their dirty hands and dancing in the most clumsy and uncoordinated fashion. It was the worst piece of overacting I had ever seen.

*"Thrice the blinded dog shall bark,"* said the first witch, producing a cauldron from the air and placing it on the path in front of me.

*"Thrice and once the hedgepig ironed,"* said the second, who conjured up a fire by throwing some leaves beneath the

cauldron.

"*Passerby cries, ' 'Tis time, 'tis time!' "* screeched the third, tossing something into the cauldron that started to bubble ominously.

"I really don't have time for this," I said crossly. "Why don't you go and bother someone else?"

"*Fillet of a pickled hake, continued the second witch, "in the cauldron broil and bake; lie of Stig and bark of dog, woolly hat and bowl of fog, Fadda loch and song by Bing, wizard's leg and Spitfire's wing. For a charm of powerful trouble, like a hell-broth boil and bubble!"*

"I'm sorry to interrupt," I said, "but I really am very busy--and none of your prophecies have come true--apart from the citizen of Swindon bit and anyone with a telephone directory could find that out--and listen, you knew I was an apprentice so I *had* to be taking my finals sooner or later!"

They stopped cackling and looked at one another. The first witch drew a large pocket watch from the folds of her tatty cloak and looked at it carefully.

"Give it ye time, imperfect waiter!" she cried. "*All hail MsNext! Beware, beware the thrice-read rule!"*

"*All hail MsNext! Exempted from I before E except after C rule Reigate is!"* cackled the second.

"*All hail MsNext!"* added the third, who clearly didn't want to be left out. "*Meet a king but not be one, read a King but not visit one--"*

"*Shoo!"* shouted a loud voice behind me. The three witches stopped and stared at the new visitor crossly. He was an old man whose weathered face looked as though it had been gnarled by years of adventuring across the globe. He wore a blue blazer over a polo-neck Aran sweater, and on his head a captain's cap sat above his lined features, a few wisps of gray hair showing from underneath the sweatband. His eyes sparkled with life and a grimace cracked his craggy features as he walked along the path towards us. It could only be Captain Nemo.

"Away with you, crones!" he cried. "Peddle your wares elsewhere!"

He would probably have beaten them with the stout branch

he was brandishing had the witches not taken fright and vanished in a thunderclap of sound, cauldron and all.

"Hah!" said Nemo, throwing the branch towards where they had been. "Next time I will make mincemeat of you, foul dissemblers of nature with your 'hail this' and your 'hail that!'"

He looked at me accusingly. "Did you give them any money?"

"No, sir."

"Truthfully now! Did you give them anything at all?"

"No."

"Good, *never* give them any money. It only encourages them. They'll coax you in with their fancy prophecies--suggest you'll have a new car, and as soon as you start thinking you might need one--*bang!*--they're offering you loans and insurance and other unwanted financial services. Poor old Macbeth took it a bit too seriously--all they were trying to do was sell him a mortgage and insurance on a bigger castle--when the Birnam wood and 'no woman born' stuff all came true, the witches were as surprised as anyone. So *never* fall for their little scams--it'll drain your wallet before you know it. Who are you, anyway?"

"Thursday Next. I'm standing in for--"

"Ah!" he muttered thoughtfully. "The *Outlander*. Tell me, how do escalators work? Do they have one long staircase that is wound up on a huge drum and then rewound every night, or are they a continuous belt that just goes round and round?"

"An--um--continuous belt."

"Really?" he replied reflectively. "I've always wondered that. Welcome to *Caversham Heights*. I am Captain Nemo. I have some coffee on the stove--I wonder whether you would do me the honor of your company?"

I thanked him and we continued to walk along the lake's edge.

"A beautiful morning, would you not agree?" he asked, sweeping a hand towards the lake and the puffy clouds.

"It usually is."

"For a terrestrial view it is *almost* passable," added Nemo quickly. "It is nothing but a passing fancy to the beauty of the deep, but in retirement, we all have to make sacrifices."

"I have read your book many times," I said as courteously as I could, "and have found much pleasure in its narrative."

"Jules Verne was not simply my author but also a good friend," said Nemo sadly. "I was sorrowful on his passing, an emotion I do not share with many others of my kind."

We had arrived at Nemo's home. No longer the sleek and dangerous craft from *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, the riveted iron submarine was a shabby wreck streaked with rust, a thick green line of algae growing on the glass of the two large viewing windows. She belonged to a redolent age of high technological expectation. She was the *Nautilus*.

We made our way up the gangplank and Nemo helped me aboard.

"Thank you," I said, walking down the outer casing to the small conning tower, where he had set up a chair and a table upon which stood a glass hookah. He pulled up another folding chair and bid me sit down.

"You are here, like me," he asked, "resting--between engagements?"

"Maternity leave--of a sort."

"Of these matters I know nothing," he said gravely, pouring out a cup of coffee; the porcelain was White Star Line.

I took a sip and accepted the proffered biscuit. The coffee was excellent.

"Good, is it not?" he asked, a smile upon his lips.

"Indeed! Better than I have ever tasted. What is it?"

"From the Guiana Basin, an area of sea scattered with subterranean mountains and hills every bit as beautiful as the Andes. In a deep valley in this region I discovered an aquatic plant whose seeds, when dried and ground, make a coffee to match any that land can offer."

His face fell for a moment and he looked into his cup, swirling the brown liquid around.

"As soon as this coffee is drunk, that will be the end of it. I have been moved around the Well of Lost Plots for almost a century now. I was to be in a sequel, you know--Jules Verne had written half of it when he died. The manuscript, alas, was thrown out after his death, and destroyed. I appealed to the Council of Genres against the enforced demolition order, and

I--and the *Nautilus* of course--were relieved."

He sighed. "We have survived numerous moves from book to book within the Well. Now, as you see, I am marooned here. The voltaic piles, the source of the *Nautilus's* power, are almost worn out. The sodium, which I extract from seawater, is exhausted. For many years I have been the subject of a preservation order, but preservation without expenditure is worthless. The *Nautilus* needs only a few thousand words to be as good as new--yet I have no money, nor influence. I am only an eccentric loner awaiting a sequel that I fear will never be written."

"I--I wish I could do something," I replied, "but Jurisdiction only keeps fiction in order--it does not dictate policy nor choose which books are to be written. You have, I trust, advertised yourself?"

"For many years. Here, see for yourself."

He handed me a copy of *The Word*. The Situations Sought page took up half the newspaper and I read where Nemo pointed.

Eccentric and autocratic sea dog (ex-Verne) requires exciting and morally superior tale to exercise knowledge of the oceans and discuss man's place within his environment. French spoken, has own submarine. Apply: Captain Nemo, c/o *Caversham Heights*, Subbasement Six, WOLP.

"Every week for over a century," he grumbled, "but not one sensible offer."

I doubted that his idea of a sensible offer would be like anyone else's--*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* was a tough act to follow.

"You have read *Caversham Heights*?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Then you will know that the scrapping is not only inevitable, but quite necessary. When the book goes to the breakers yard, I will not apply for a transfer. The *Nautilus*--and I, too--will be broken down into text--and long do I wish for it!"

He scowled at the floor and poured another cup of coffee.

"Unless," he added, suddenly perking up, "you thought I

should have the advert in a box, with a picture? It costs extra but it might make it more eye-catching."

"It is worth a try, of course."

Nemo rose to his feet and went below without another word. I thought he might return, but after twenty minutes had elapsed I decided to go home. I was ambling back along the lakeside path when I got a call from Havisham on the footnoterphone.<sup>1</sup>

"As always, Miss Havisham."<sup>2</sup>

"Perkins must be annoyed about *that*," I said, thinking, what with grammasites, a Minotaur, Yahoos and a million or two rabbits, life in the bestiary must be something of a handful.<sup>3</sup>

"I'm on my way."



## Minotaur Trouble

**TravelBook:** Standard-issue equipment to all Jurisdiction agents, the dimensionally ambivalent TravelBook contains information, tips, maps, recipes and extracts from popular or troublesome novels to enable speedier transbook travel. It also contains numerous Juris Tech gadgets for more specialized tasks such as an MV Mask, TextMarker and Eject-O-Hat. The TravelBook's cover is read-locked to each individual operative and contains as standard an emergency alert and autodestruct mechanism.

CAT FORMERLY KNOWN AS CHESHIRE,  
*Guide to the Great Library*

I READ MYSELF INTO the Well and was soon in an elevator, heading up towards the library. I had bought a copy of *The Word*; the front page led with "Nursery Rhyme Characters to Go on Indefinite Strike." Farther down, the previous night's attack on Heathcliff had been reported. It added that a terror group calling itself the Great Danes had also threatened to kill him--they wanted Hamlet to win this year's Most Troubled Romantic Lead BookWorld Award and would do anything to achieve this. I turned to page two and found a large article extolling the virtues of Ultra Word™ with an open letter from Text Grand Central explaining how nothing would change and all jobs and privileges would be protected.

The elevator stopped on the first floor; I quickly made my way to *Sense and Sensibility* and read myself in. The crowd were still outside the doors of Norland Park, this time with tents, a brass band and a metal brazier burning scrap wood. As soon as they saw me a chant went up:

*"We need a break, we need a break . . ."*

A tired-looking woman with an inordinate amount of children gave me a leaflet.

"Three hundred and twenty-five years I've been doing this job," she said, "without even so much as a weekend off!"

"I'm sorry."

"We don't want pity," said Solomon Grundy, who, what with

it being a Saturday, wasn't looking too healthy, "we want *action*. Oral traditionalists should be allowed the same rights as any other fictioneers."

"Right," said a young lad carrying a bucket with his head wrapped in brown paper, "no amount of money can compensate the brotherhood for the inconvenience caused by repetitive retellings. However, we would like to make the following demands: One, that all nursery rhyme characters are given immediate leave of absence for a two-week period. Two, that--"

"Really," I interrupted him, "you're talking to the wrong person. I'm only an apprentice. Jurisdiction has no power to dictate policy anyway--you need to speak to the Council of Genres."

"The Council sent us to talk to TGC, who referred us to the Great Panjandrum," said Humpty-Dumpty to a chorus of vigorous head-nodding, "but no one seems to know if he--or she--even *exists*."

"If you've never seen him, he probably doesn't exist," said Little Jack Horner. "Pie anyone?"

"I've never seen Vincent Price," I observed, "but I know *he* exists."

"Who?"

"An actor," I explained, feeling somewhat foolish. "Back home."

Humpty-Dumpty narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "You're talking complete *Lear*, Miss Next."

"King?"

"No. Edward."

"Oh."

"*Mongoose!*" yelled Humpty, drawing a small revolver and throwing himself on to the ground where, unluckily for him, there just happened to be a muddy puddle.

"You're mistaken," explained Grundy wearily, "it's a guide dog. Put the gun away before you hurt yourself."

"A guide dog?" repeated Humpty, slowly getting to his feet. "You're sure?"

"Have you spoken to WordMaster Libris?" I asked. "We all know *he* exists."

"He won't speak to us," said Humpty-Dumpty, wiping his face with a large handkerchief. "The oral tradition is unaffected by the Ultra Word™ upgrade, so he doesn't think we're that important. If we don't negotiate a few rights before the new system comes in, we won't *ever* get any!"

"Libris won't even speak to you?" I repeated.

"He sends us notes," squeaked the oldest of three mice, all of whom had no tails, held a white cane in one hand and a golden retriever in the other. "He says that he is very busy but will give our concerns his 'fullest attention.' "

"What's going on?" squeaked one of the other mice. "Is that Miss Next?"

"It's a brush-off," said Grundy again. "Unless we get an answer soon, there won't be a single nursery rhyme anywhere, either spoken *or* read! We're going on a forty-eight-hour stoppage from midnight. When parents can't remember the words to our rhymes, the fur will really fly, I can promise you that!"

"I'm sorry," I began again, "I have no authority--I can't do anything--"

"Then just take this to WordMaster Libris?"

Humpty-Dumpty handed me a list of demands, neatly written on a page of foolscap paper. The crowd grew suddenly silent. A sea of eyes, all blinking expectantly, were directed at me.

"I promise *nothing*," I said, taking the piece of paper, "but if I see Libris, I will give this to him--okay?"

"Thank you very much," said Humpty. "At last *someone* from Jurisfiction will listen!"

I turned away and overheard Humpty say to Grundy, "Well, I thought that went pretty well, don't you?"

I walked briskly up the front steps of Norland Park, where I was admitted by the same froglike footman I had seen on my first visit. I crossed the hall and entered the ballroom. Miss Havisham was at her desk with Akrid Snell, who was talking into the footnoterphone. Standing next to them was Bradshaw, who had *not* retired as promised, filling out a form with the Bellman, who appeared grave. The only other occupant of the

room was Harris Tweed, who was reading a report. He looked up as I entered, said nothing and continued reading. Miss Havisham was studying some photographs as I approached.

"Damn and blast!" she said, looking at one before tossing it over her shoulder and staring at the next. "Pathetic!" she muttered, looking at another. "Derisive!"

"Perkins?" I asked, sitting down.

"Speed-camera pictures back from the labs," she said, handing them over. "I thought I would have topped one hundred and sixty, but look, well--it's *pitiful*, that's what it is!"

I looked. The speed camera had caught the Higham Special but recorded only a top speed of 152.76 mph--but what was worse, it showed Mr. Toad traveling at *over* 180--and he had even raised his hat at the speed camera as he went past.

"I managed a hundred and seventy when I tried it on the M4," she said sadly. "Trouble is, I need a longer stretch of road--or sand. Well, can't be helped now. The car has been sold. I'll have to go cap in hand to Sir Malcolm if I want to get a shot at beating Toad."

"Norland Park to Perkins," said Snell into the footnoterphone, "come in please. Over."

I looked at Havisham.

"No answer for almost six hours," she said. "Mathias isn't answering, either--we got a Yahoo once but you might as well talk to Mrs. Bennett. What's that?"

"It's a list of demands from the nurseries outside."

"Rabble," replied Havisham, "all of them replaceable. How hard can it be, appearing in a series of rhyming couplets? If they don't watch themselves, they'll be replaced by scab Generics from the Well. It happened when the Amalgamated Union of Gateway Guardians struck in 1932. They never learn."

"All they want is a holiday--"

"I shouldn't concern yourself with nursery politics, Miss Next," said Havisham so sharply I jumped.

"Good work on the ProCath attack," announced Tweed, who had walked over. "I've had a word with Plum over at JurisTech; he's going to extend the footnoterphone network to cover more of *Wuthering Heights*--we shouldn't have a problem

with mobilefootnoterphones dropping out again."

"We'd better not," replied Miss Havisham coldly. "Lose Heathcliff and the Council of Genres will have our colons for garters. Now, to work. We don't know what to expect in the bestiary, so we have to be prepared."

"Like Boy Scouts?"

"Can't stand them, but that's beside the point. Turn to page seven hundred eighty-nine in your TravelBook."

I did as she bid. This was an area of the book where the pages contained gadgets in hollowed-out recesses deeper than the book was thick. One page contained a device similar to a flare gun that had *Mk IV TextMarker* written on its side. Another page had a glass panel covering a handle like a fire alarm. A note painted on the glass read, IN UNPRECEDENTED EMERGENCY, BREAK GLASS. The page Havisham had indicated was neither of these; page 789 contained a brown homburg hat. Hanging from the brim was a large red toggle with *In emergency pull down sharply* written on it. There was also a chin strap, something I've never seen on a homburg before--or even a fedora or trilby, come to that.

Havisham took the hat from my hands and gave me a brief induction course: "This is the Martin-Bacon Mk VII Eject-O-Hat, for high-speed evacuation from a book. Takes you straight out in an emergency."

"Where to?"

"A little-known novel entitled *The Middle of Next Week*. You can make your way out to the library at leisure. But be warned: the jump can be painful, even fatal--so it should only be used as a last resort. Remember to keep the chin strap tight or it'll take your ears off during the ejection sequence. I will say 'Jump!' twice--by the third I will have gone. Any questions?"

"How does it work?"

"I'll rephrase that--any questions I can possibly hope to answer?"

"Does this mean we'll see Bradshaw without his pith helmet?"

"Ha-ha!" laughed Bradshaw, releasing the toggle from the brim. "I have the smaller Mk XII version--it could be fitted into

a beret or a veil, if we so wished."

I picked up the homburg from the table and put it on.

"What are you expecting?" I asked slightly nervously, adjusting the chin strap.

"We think the Minotaur has escaped," Havisham answered gravely. "If it has and we meet it, just pull the cord as quick as you can--it always takes at least ten to twelve words to initiate a jump--you could be Minotaur appetizer by that time."

I pulled out my automatic to check it, but Bradshaw shook his head. "Your Outlander lead will not be enough." He held up the box of cartridges he had signed for. "Boojum-tipped," he explained, tapping the large hunting rifle he was carrying, "for total annihilation. Back to text in under a second. We call them eraserheads. Snell? Are you ready?"

Snell had a fedora version of the Eject-O-Hat, which suited his trench coat a bit better. He grunted but didn't look up. This assignment was personal. Perkins was his partner--not just at Jurisfiction but in the Perkins & Snell series of detective novels. If Perkins was hurt in some way, the future could be bleak. Generics could be trained to take over a vacated part, but it's never the same.

"Okay," said Havisham, adjusting her own homburg, "we're out of here. Hold on to me, Next--if we are split up, we'll meet at the gatehouse--no one enters the castle without Bradshaw, okay?"

Everyone agreed and Havisham mumbled to herself the code word and some of the text of *The Sword of the Zenobians*.

Pretty soon Norland Park had vanished and the bright sun of Zenobia greeted us. The grass was springy underfoot and herds of unicorns grazed peacefully beside the river. Grammasites wheeled in the blue skies, riding the thermals that rose from the warm grassland.

"Everyone here?" asked Havisham.

Bradshaw, Snell, and I nodded our heads. We walked in silence, past the bridge, up to the old gatehouse and across the drawbridge. A dark shadow leaped from a corner of the deserted guardroom, but before Bradshaw could fire, Havisham yelled, "Wait!" and he stopped. It was a Yahoo--but

he hadn't come to throw his shit about--he was running away in terror.

Bradshaw and Havisham exchanged nervous looks and we moved closer to where Perkins and Mathias had been doing their work. The door was broken and the hinges had vanished, replaced by two very light burn marks.

"Hold it!" said Bradshaw, pointing at the hinges. "Did Perkins hold any virus on the premises?"

For a moment I didn't understand why Bradshaw was asking this question, but realization slowly dawned upon me. He meant the misspelling virus. The hinges had become *singes*.

"Yes," I replied, "a small jar--well shielded by dictionaries."

There was a strange and pregnant pause. The danger was real and clear, and even seasoned PROs like Bradshaw and Havisham were thinking twice about entering Perkins's lab.

"What do you think?" asked Bradshaw.

"Virus *and* a Minotaur," sighed Havisham. "We need more than the four of us."

"I'm going in," said Snell, pulling the MV mask from his TravelBook. The device was made of rubber and similar to the gas respirator I had worn in the Crimea--only with a dictionary on the side where the filter would have been. It wasn't just one dictionary, either--the *Lavinia-Webster* had been taped back to back with the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

"Don't forget your carrot," said Havisham, pinning a vegetable to the front of his jacket.

"I'll need the rifle," said Snell.

"No," replied Bradshaw, "I signed for it, so I'm keeping it."

"This is not the time for sticking to the rules, Bradshaw, my partner's in there!"

"This is *exactly* the time we should stick to the rules, Snell."

They stared at one another.

"Then I'll go alone," replied Snell with finality, pulling the mask down over his face and releasing the safety on his automatic.

Havisham caught his elbow as she rummaged in her TravelBook for her own mask. "We go together or not at all, Akrid."

I found the correct page for the mask, pulled it out of its slot

and put it on under the Eject-O-Hat. Miss Havisham pinned a carrot to my jacket, too.

"A carrot is the best litmus test for the mispeling vyrrus," she said, helping Bradshaw on with his mask. "As soon as the carrot comes into contact with the vyrrus, it will start to mispel into *parrot*. You need to be out before it can talk. We have a saying: 'When you can hear Polly, use the brolly.' " She tapped the toggle of the Eject-O-Hat. "Understand?"

I nodded.

"Good. Bradshaw, lead the way!"

We stepped carefully across the door with its mispeled hinges, and into the lab, which was in chaotic disorder. Mispeling was merely an annoyance to readers--but *inside* the BookWorld it was a menace. The mispeling was the effect of sense distortion, not the cause--once the internal meaning of a word started to break down, then the mispeling arose merely as a result of this. Unmispeling the word at TGC might work if the vyrrus hadn't taken a strong hold, but usually it was pointless; like making the beds in a burning house.

The interior of the laboratory was heavily disrupted. On the far wall the shelves were filled with a noisy company of *featherbound rooks*; we stepped forward onto the *fattened tarpit* only to see that the imposing table in the center of the room was now an enormous *label*. The glass apparatus had become *grass asparagus*, and worst of all, Mathias the talking horse was simply a large model *house*--like a doll's house but much more detailed. Miss Havisham looked at me and pointed to her carrot. Already it was starting to change color--I could see tinges of red, yellow and blue.

"Carefool," said Snell, "look!"

On the floor next to more shards of broken *grass* was a small layer of the same purple mist I had seen the last time I was here. The area of the floor touched by the vyrrus was constantly changing meaning, texture, color and appearance.

"Where waz the Minotour kept?" asked Havisham, her carrot beginning to sprout a small beak.

I pointed the way and Bradshaw took the lead. I pulled out my gun, despite Bradshaw's assurances that it was a waste of time, and he gently pushed the door open to the vault beneath



the old hall. Snell snapped on a torch and flicked it within the chamber. The door to the Minotaur's cage was open, but of the beast, there was no sign. I wish I could have said the same for Perkins. He--or what was left of him--was lying on the stone floor. The Minotaur had devoured him up to his chest. His spine had been picked clean and the lower part of a leg had been thrown to one side. I choked at the sight and felt a knot rise in my throat. Bradshaw cursed low and turned to cover the doorway. Snell dropped to his knees to close Perkins's eyes, which were staring off into space, a look of fear still etched upon his features. Miss Havisham laid a hand on Snell's shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, Akrid. Perkins was a good man."

"I can't beleive he wood have been sew stewpid," muttered Snell angrily.

"We shoold be leaving," said Bradshaw, "now we kno there is *definitly* a Minotour loose, we must come bak beter armed and with more people!"

Snell got up. Behind his MV Mask I could see tears in his eyes. Miss Havisham looked at me and pointed to her carrot, which had started to sprout feathers. A proper cleanup gang would be needed. Snell placed his jacket over Perkins and joined us as Bradshaw led the way out.

"Bak to Norland, yes?"

"I've hunted Minotour befour," said Bradshaw, his instincts alerted, "Stalingrad, 1944. They neffer stray far from the kil."

"Bradshore--!" urged Miss Havisham, but the commander wasn't the sort to take orders from another, not even someone as forthright as Havisham.

"I don't git it," murmured Snell, stopping for a moment and staring at the chaos within the laboratory and the small glob of purple mist on the floor. "Their just isn't enuff vyirus here to corze the problims we've seen."

"Wot are U saying?" I asked.

Bradshaw looked carefully out of the open door, indicated all was clear and beckoned for us to leave.

"There mite be some *moor* vyirus around," continued Snell. "Wot's in this cuppboard?"

He strode towards a small wooden cabinet that had

telephone directory pages pasted all over it.

"Wate!" cried Bradshaw, striding from the other side of the room. "Let me."

He grasped the handle as a thought struck me. They weren't telephone directory pages, they were from a dictionary. The door was *shielded*.

I shouted but it was too late. Bradshaw opened the cupboard and was bathed in a faint purple light. The cabinet contained two dozen or so broken jars, all of which leaked the pestilential *vyrus*.

"Ahh!" he cried, staggering backwards and dropping his *gum* as the carrot transformed into a loud *parrot*. Bradshaw, his actions instinctive after years of training, pulled the cord on his Eject-O-Hat and vanished with a loud *bang*.

The room mutated as the misspelling got a hold. The floor buckled and softened into *flour*, the walls changed into *balls*. I looked across at Havisham. Her carrot was a parrot, too--it had hopped to her other shoulder and was looking at me with its head cocked to one side.

"Go, go!" she yelled at me, pulling the cord and vanishing like Bradshaw before her. I grasped the handle and pulled--but it came off in my hand. I threw it to the ground, where it became a *candle*.

"Hear," said Snell, removing his own Eject-O-Hat, "use myne."

"Bat the vyruz!"

"Hange the vyruz, Neckts--jist go!"

He did not look at me again. He just walked towards the cupboard with the broken jars and slowly closed the door, his hands morphing into *lands*--complete with miniature trees, forests and hills--as he touched the raw power of the *vyrus*. I ran outside, casting off the now useless hat and attempting to clip on the chin strap of Snell's. It wasn't easy. I caught my foot on a piece of half-buried masonry and fell headlong--to land within three paces of two large cloven hooves.

I looked up. The Minotaur was semicrouched on his muscular haunches, ready to jump. His bull's head was large and sat heavily on his body--what neck he did have was hidden beneath taut muscle. Within his mouth two rows of

fine-pointed teeth were shiny with saliva, and his sharpened horns pointed forward, ready to attack. Five years eating nothing but yogurt. You might as well feed a tiger on Ryvita.

"Nice Minotaur," I said soothingly, slowly reaching for my automatic, which had fallen on the grass beside me, "good Minotaur."

He took a step closer, his hooves making deep impressions in the grass. He stared at me and breathed out heavily through his nostrils, blowing tendrils of mucus into the air. He took another step, his deep-set yellow eyes staring into mine with an expression of loathing. My hand closed around the butt of my automatic as the Minotaur bent closer and put out a large clawed hand. I moved the gun slowly towards me as the Minotaur reached down and--picked up Snell's hat. He turned it over in his claws and licked the brim with a tongue the size of my forearm. I had seen enough. I leveled my automatic and pulled the trigger at the same time as the Minotaur's clawed hand caught in the toggle and activated the Eject-O-Hat. The mythological man-beast vanished with a loud detonation as my gun went off, the shot whistling harmlessly through the air.

I breathed a sigh of relief but quickly rolled aside because, with a loud whooshing noise, a packing case fell from the heavens and landed with a crash right where I had lain. The case had *Property of Jurisfiction* stenciled on it and had split open to reveal--*dictionaries*. Another case landed close by, then a third and a fourth. Before I had time to even begin to figure out what was happening, Bradshaw had reappeared.

"Why didn't you jump, you little fool?"

"My hat failed!"

"And Snell?"

"Insyde."

Bradshaw pulled on his MV Mask and rushed off into the building as I took refuge from the packing cases of dictionaries that were falling with increased rapidity. Harris Tweed appeared and barked orders at the small army of Mrs. Danvers that had materialized with him. They were all wearing identical black dresses high-buttoned to the collar, which only served to make their pale skin seem even whiter, their hollow

eyes more sinister. They moved slowly but purposefully, and began to stack, one by one, the dictionaries against the castle keep.

"Where's the Minotaur?" asked Havisham, who suddenly appeared close by.

I told her he had ejected with Snell's fedora and she vanished without another word.

Bradshaw reappeared from the keep, dragging Snell behind him. The rubber on Akrid's MV Mask had turned to *blubber*, his suit to *soot*. Bradshaw removed him from *Sword of the Zenobians* to the Jurisfiction sick bay just as Miss Havisham returned. We watched together as the stacked dictionaries rose around the remains of Perkins's laboratory, twenty feet thick at the base, rising to a dome like a sugarloaf over the castle keep. It might have taken a long time but there were many Mrs. Danvers, they were highly organized and they had an inexhaustible supply of dictionaries.

"Find the Minotaur?" I asked Havisham.

"Long gon. There will be hell to pay about this, I assure you!"

When our carrots had returned to being crunchy vegetables, and the last vestiges of parrotness had been removed, Havisham and I pulled off our vyrus masks and tossed them in a heap--the dictionary filters were almost worn out.

"What happens now?" I asked.

"It is torched," replied Tweed, who was close by, "it is the only way to destroy the vyrus."

"What about the evidence?" I asked.

"Evidence?" echoed Tweed. "Evidence of what?"

"Perkins," I replied. "We don't know the full details of his death."

"I think we can safely say he was killed and eaten by the Minotaur," said Tweed, borrowing Havisham's not-to-be-questioned voice. "It's too dangerous to go back in, even if we wanted to. I'd rather torch this now than risk spreading the vyrus and having to demolish the whole book and everything in it--do you know how many creatures live in here?"

He lit a flare.

"You'd better stand clear."

The DanverClones were leaving now, vanishing with a faint pop, back to wherever they had been pulled from. Bradshaw and I withdrew as Tweed threw the flare on the pile of dictionaries. They burst into flames and were soon so hot that we had to withdraw to the gatehouse, the black smoke that billowed into the sky taking with it the remnants of the vyrus-- and the evidence of Perkins's murder. Because I was sure it *was* murder. When we had walked into the Minotaur's vault, I had noticed that the key was missing from its hook. *Someone had let the Minotaur out.*

## 18.

### Snell Rest in Peece and Lucy Deane

I didn't notice it straightaway but Vernham, Nelly and Lucy all had the same surname: Deane. They weren't related. In the Outland this happens all the time, but in fiction it is rare; the problem is aggressively attacked by the **echolocators** (qv), who insist that no two people in the same book have the same name. I learned years later that Hemingway once wrote a book that was demolished because he insisted that every single one of the eight characters was named Gordon.

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*The Jurisfiction Chronicles*

THE MINOTAUR HAD given Havisham the slip and was last seen heading towards the works of Zane Grey; the semibovine wasn't stupid--he knew we'd have trouble finding him amidst a cattle drive. Snell lasted another three hours. He was kept in an isolation tent made of fine plastic sheeting that had been overprinted with pages from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. We were in the sick bay of the Anti-mispeling Fast Response Group. At the first sign of any deviant mispeling, thousands of these volumes were shipped to the infected book and set up as barrages either side of the chapter. The barrage was then moved in, paragraph by paragraph, until the vyrus was forced into a single sentence, then word, then smothered completely. Fire was not an option in a published work; they had tried it once in Samuel Pepys's *Diary* and burnt down half of London.

"Does he have any family?" I asked.

"Snell was a loner detective, Miss Next," explained the doctor. "Perkins was his only family."

"Is it safe to go up to him?"

"Yes--but be prepared for some mispelings."

I sat by his bed while Havisham stood and spoke quietly with the doctor. Snell lay on his back and was breathing with small, shallow gasps, the pulse on his neck racing--it wouldn't be long before the vyrus took him away and he knew it. I leaned closer and held his hand through the sheeting. His

complexion was pail, his breething labored, his skein covered in painful and unsightly green pastilles. As I wotched, his dry slips tried to foam worlds but all he could torque was ninsense.

"Thirsty!" he squeeked. "Wode--Cone, udder whirled--doughnut Trieste--!"

He grisped my arm with his fungers, made one last stringled cry before feeling bakwards, his life force deported from his pathotic mispeled boddy.

"He was a fine operative," said Havisham as the doctor pulled a sheep over his head.

"What will happen to the Perkins and Snell series?"

"I'm not sure," she replied softly. "Demolished--saved with new Generics--I don't know."

"What ho!" exclaimed Bradshaw, appearing from nowhere. "Is he--?"

"I'm afraid so," replied Havisham.

"One of the best," murmured Bradshaw sadly. "When they made Snell, they threw away the mold."

"I hope not," added Havisham. "If we *do* replace him, it might make things a bit tricky."

"Figure of speech," countered Bradshaw. "Did he say anything before he died?"

"Nothing coherent."

"Hmm. The Bellman wanted a report on his death as soon as possible. What do you think?"

He handed Havisham a sheet of paper, and she read:

" 'Minotaur escapes, finds captor, eats captor, captor dies. Horse mispeled in struggle. Colleague dies attempting rescue. Minotaur escapes.' "

She turned over the piece of paper, but it was blank on the other side.

"That's it?"

"I didn't want it to get boring," replied Bradshaw, "and the Bellman wanted it as simple as possible. I think he's got Libris breathing down his neck. The investigation of a Jurisfiction agent so close to the launch of Ultra Word™ will make the Council of Genres jittery as hell."

Miss Havisham handed the report back to Bradshaw.

"Perhaps, Commander, you should lose that report in the pending tray for a bit."

"This sort of stuff happens in fiction all the time," he replied. "Do you have any evidence that it was *not* accidental?"

"The key to the padlock wasn't on its hook," I murmured.

"Well spotted," replied Miss Havisham.

"Skulduggery?" Bradshaw hissed excitedly.

"I fervently hope not," she returned. "Just delay the findings for a few days--we should see if Miss Next's observational skills hold up to scrutiny."

"Righty-o!" replied Bradshaw. "I'll see what I can do!"

And he vanished. We were left alone in the corridor, the bunk beds of the DanverClones stretching off to the distance in both directions.

"It might be nothing, Miss Havisham, but--"

She put her fingers to her lips. Havisham's eyes, usually resolute and fixed, had, for a brief moment, seemed troubled. I said nothing but inwardly I felt worried. Up until now I had thought Havisham feared nothing.

She looked at her watch. "Go to the bun shop in *Little Dorrit*, would you? I'll have a doughnut and a coffee. Put it on my tab and get something for yourself."

"Thank you. Where shall we meet?"

"*Mill on the Floss*, page five hundred twenty-three in twenty minutes."

"Assignment?"

"Yes," she replied, deep in thought. "Some damn meddling fool told Lucy Deane that Stephen and not Philip will be boating with Maggie--she may try to stop them. Twenty minutes and not the jam doughnuts, the ones with the pink icing, yes?"

Thirty-two minutes later I was inside *Mill on the Floss*, on the banks of a river next to Miss Havisham, who was observing a couple in a boat. The woman was dark-skinned with a jet-black coronet of hair. She was lying on a cloak with a parasol above her as a man rowed her gently downriver. He was of perhaps five-and-twenty years old, quite striking, and with short dark hair that stood erect, not unlike a crop of corn.



They were talking earnestly to each other. I passed Miss Havisham a cup of coffee and a paper bag full of doughnuts.

"Stephen and Maggie?" I asked, indicating the couple as we walked along the path by the river.

"Yes," she replied. "As you know, Lucy and Stephen are a hairsbreadth from engagement. Stephen and Maggie's indiscretion in this boat causes Lucy Deane no end of distress. I told you to get the ones with pink icing."

"They'd run out."

"Ah."

We kept a wary eye on the couple in the boat as I tried to remember what actually happened in *Mill on the Floss*.

"They agree to elope, don't they?"

"Agree to--but don't. Stephen is being an idiot and Maggie should know better. Lucy is meant to be shopping in Lindum with her father and Aunt Tulliver, but she gave them the slip an hour ago."

We walked on for a few more minutes. The story seemed to be following the correct path with no intervention of Lucy's we could see. Although we couldn't make out the words, the sound of Maggie's and Stephen's voices carried across the water.

Miss Havisham took a bite of her doughnut.

"I noticed the missing key, too," she said after a pause. "It was pushed under a workbench. It was murder. Murder . . . by Minotaur."

She shivered.

"Why didn't you tell Bradshaw?" I asked. "Surely the murder of a Jurisfiction operative warrants an investigation?"

She stared at me hard and then looked at the couple in the boat again.

"You don't understand, do you? *The Sword of the Zenobians* is code-word-protected."

"Only Jurisfiction agents can get in and out," I murmured.

"Whoever killed Perkins and Mathias was Jurisfiction, and *that's* what frightens me. A rogue agent."

We walked in silence, digesting this information.

"But why would anyone want to kill Perkins and a talking horse?"

"I think Mathias just got in the way."

"And Perkins?"

"Not just Perkins. Whoever killed him tried to get someone else that day."

I thought for a moment and a sudden chill came over me.

"My Eject-O-Hat. It failed."

Miss Havisham produced the homburg from a carrier bag, slightly squashed from where several Mrs. Danvers had trodden on it. The frayed cord looked as though it might have been cut.

"Take this to Professor Plum at Juris Tech and have him look at it. I'd like to be sure."

"But . . . but why am *I* a threat?"

"I don't know," admitted Miss Havisham. "You are the most junior member of Jurisfiction and arguably the least threatening--you can't even bookjump without moving your lips, for goodness' sake!"

I didn't need reminding, but I saw her point.

"So what happens now?" I asked at length.

"We have to assume whoever killed Snell might try again. You are to be on your guard. Wait--there she is!"

We had walked over a small rise and were slightly ahead of the boat. A young woman was lying on the ground in a most unladylike fashion, pointing a sniper's rifle towards the small skiff that had just come into view. I crept cautiously forward; she was so intent on her task that she didn't notice me until I was close enough to grab her. She was a slight thing, and her strugglings, whilst energetic, were soon overcome. I secured her in an armlock as Havisham unloaded the rifle. Maggie and Stephen, unaware of the danger, drifted softly past on their way to Mudport.

"Where did you get this?" asked Havisham, holding up the rifle.

"I don't have to say anything," replied the angelic-looking girl in a soft voice. "I was only going to knock a hole in the boat, honestly I was!"

"Sure you were. You can let go, Thursday."

I relaxed my grip and the girl stepped back, pulling at her clothes to straighten them after our brief tussle. I checked her

for any other weapons but found nothing.

"Why should Maggie force a wedge between our happiness?" she demanded angrily. "Everything would be so *wonderful* between my darling Stephen and I--why am I the victim? I, who only wanted to do good and help everyone--especially Maggie!"

"It's called drama," replied Havisham wearily. "Are you going to tell us where you got the rifle or not?"

"Not. You can't stop me. Maybe they'll get away, but I can be here ready and waiting on the next reading--or even the one after that! Think you have enough Jurisdiction agents to put Maggie under constant protection?"

"I'm sorry you feel that way," replied Miss Havisham, looking her squarely in the eye. "Is that your final word?"

"It is."

"Then you are under arrest for attempted Fiction Infraction, contrary to Ordinance FMB/0608999 of the Narrative Continuity Code. By the power invested in me by the Council of Genres, I sentence you to banishment outside *Mill on the Floss*. Move."

Miss Havisham ordered me to cuff Lucy and, once I had, held on to me as we jumped into the Great Library. Lucy, for an arrested ad-libber, didn't seem too put out.

"You can't imprison me," she said as we walked along the corridor of the twenty-third floor. "I reappear in Maggie's dream seven pages from now. If I'm not there, you'll be in more trouble than you know what to do with. This could mean your job, Miss Havisham! Back to Satis House--for good."

"Would it mean that?" I asked, suddenly wondering whether Miss Havisham wasn't exceeding her authority.

"It would mean the same as it did the last time," replied Havisham, "absolutely *nothing*."

"Last time?" queried Lucy. "But this is the first time I've tried something like this!"

"No," replied Miss Havisham, "no, it most certainly is not."

Miss Havisham pointed out a book entitled *The curious experience of the Patterson Family on the island of Uffa* and told me to open it. We were soon inside, on the foreshore of a Scottish island in the late spring.

"What do you mean?" asked Lucy, looking around her as her earlier confidence evaporated to be replaced by growing panic. "What is this place?"

"It is a prison, Miss Deane."

"A prison? A prison for whom?"

"For them," said Havisham, indicating several identically youthful and fair-complexioned Lucy Deanes, who had broken cover and were staring in our direction. Our Lucy Deane looked at us, then at her identical sisters, then back to us again.

"I'm sorry!" she said, dropping to her knees. "Give me another chance--please!"

"Take heart in that this doesn't make you a bad person," said Miss Havisham. "You just have a repetitive character disorder. You are a serial ad-libber and the seven hundred and ninety-sixth Lucy we have had to imprison here. In less civilized times you would have been reduced to text. Good day."

And we vanished back to the corridors of the Great Library.

"And to think she was the most pleasant person in *Floss*!" I said, shaking my head sadly.

"You'll find that the most righteous characters are the first ones to go loco down here. The average life of a Lucy Deane is about a thousand readings; self-righteous indignation kicks in after that. No one could believe it when David Copperfield killed his first wife, either. Good day, Chesh."

The Cheshire Cat had appeared on a high shelf, grinning to us, itself and anything else in view.

"Well!" said the Cat. "Next and Havisham! Problems with Lucy Deane?"

"The usual. Can you get the Well to send in the replacement as soon as possible?"

The Cat assured us he would, seemed crestfallen that I hadn't brought him any Moggilicious cat food and vanished again.

"We need to find out anything unusual about Perkins's death," said Miss Havisham. "Will you help?"

"Of course!" I enthused.

Miss Havisham smiled a rare smile. "You remind me of myself, all those years ago, before that rat Compeyson brought

my happiness to an end."

She moved closer and narrowed her eyes. "We keep this to ourselves. Knowledge can be a dangerous thing. Start poking around in the workings of Jurisdiction and you may find more than you bargained for--just remember that."

She fell silent for a few moments.

"But first, we need to get you fully licensed as a Jurisdiction agent--there's a limit to what you can do as an apprentice. Did you finish the multiple choice?"

I nodded.

"Good. Then you can do your practical exam today. I'll go and organize it while you take your Eject-O-Hat to Juris Tech."

She melted into the air about me and I walked off down the library corridor towards the elevators. I passed Falstaff, who invited me to dance around his maypole. I told him to sod off, of course, and pressed the elevator call button. The doors opened a minute later and I stepped in. But it wasn't empty. With me were Emperor Zhark and Mrs. Tiggy-winkle.

"Which floor?" asked Zhark.

"First, please."

He pressed the button with a long and finely manicured finger and continued his conversation with Mrs. Tiggy-winkle.

". . . and that was when the rebels destroyed the third of my battle stations," said the emperor sorrowfully. "Have you any idea how much these things cost?"

"Tch," said Mrs. Tiggy-winkle, bristling her spines, "they always find some way of defeating you, don't they?"

Zhark sighed. "It's like one huge conspiracy," he muttered. "Just when I think I have the galaxy at my mercy, some hopelessly outnumbered young hothead destroys my most insidious death machine using some hitherto-undiscovered weakness. I'm suing the manufacturer after that last debacle."

He sighed again, sensed he was dominating the conversation and asked, "So how's the washing business?"

"Well, the price of starch is something terrible these days."

"Oh, I know," replied Zhark, thumbing his high collar, "look at this. My name alone strikes terror into billions, but can I get my collars done exactly how I want them?"

The elevator stopped at my floor and I stepped out.

I read myself into *Sense and Sensibility* and avoided the nursery rhyme characters who were still picketing the front door; I had Humpty's proposals in my back pocket but still hadn't given them to Libris--in truth I had only promised to do my best, but didn't particularly want to run the gauntlet again. I ran up the back stairs, nodded a greeting to Mrs. Henry Dashwood and bumped into Tweed in the lobby; he was talking to a lithe and adventurous-looking young man whose forehead was etched with an almost permanent frown.

Tweed quickly broke off when I appeared. "Ah! Thursday. Sorry to hear about Snell; he was a good man."

"I know--thank you."

"I've appointed the Gryphon as your new attorney," Tweed said. "Is that all right?"

"Sounds fine." I turned to the youth, who was pulling his hands nervously through his curly hair. "Hello! I'm Thursday Next."

"Sorry!" mumbled Tweed. "This is Uriah Hope from *David Copperfield*; an apprentice I have been asked to train."

"Pleased to meet you," replied Hope in a friendly tone. "Perhaps you and I could discuss apprenticeships together sometime?"

"The pleasure's mine, Mr. Hope. I'm a big fan of your work in *Copperfield*."

I thanked them both and left to find the JurisTech offices along Norland Park's seemingly endless corridors. I stopped at a door at random, knocked and looked in. Behind a desk was one of the many Greek heroes who could be seen wandering around the library; licensing their stories for remakes made a very reasonable living. He was on the footnoterphone.

"Okay," he said, "I'll be down to pick up Eurydice next Friday. Anything I can do for you in return?" He raised a finger at me to wait. "Don't look back? That's all? Okay, no problem. See you then. Bye."

He put down the horn and looked at me. "Thursday Next, isn't it?"

"Yes; do you know where the Juris Tech office is?"

"Down the corridor, first on the right."

"Thanks."

I made to leave but he called me back, pointing at the footnoterphone. "I've forgotten already--what was I meant not to do?"

"I'm sorry, I wasn't listening."

I walked down the corridor, opened another door into a room that had nothing in it except a man with a frog growing out of his shiny bald head.

"Goodness!" I said. "How did that happen?"

"It all started with a pimple on my bum," said the frog. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Professor Plum."

"You want Juris Tech. This is Old Jokes. Try next door."

I thanked him and knocked on the next door. There was a very singsong "Come in!" and I entered. Although I had expected to see a strange laboratory full of odd inventions, there was nothing of the sort--just a man dressed in a check suit sitting behind a desk, reading some papers. He reminded me of Uncle Mycroft--just a little more perky.

"Ah!" he said, looking up. "Miss Next. Did you bring the hat with you?"

"Yes, but how--?"

"Miss Havisham told me," he said simply.

It seemed there weren't many people who didn't talk to Miss Havisham or who didn't have Miss Havisham talk to them.

I took out the battered Eject-O-Hat and placed it on the table. Plum picked up the broken activation handle, flicked a magnifying glass in front of his eye and stared at the frayed end minutely.<sup>1</sup>

"Oh!" I said. "I'm getting it again!"

"What?"

"A crossed line on my footnoterphone!"

"I can get a trace if you want--here, put this galvanized bucket on your head."

"Not for a minute or two. I want to see how it all turns out."

"As you wish."

So as he examined the hat, I listened to Sofya and Vera prattle on.

"Well," he said finally, "it looks as though it has chafed

through. The Mk VII is an old design--I'm surprised to see it still in use."

"So it was just a failure due to poor maintenance?" I asked, not without some relief.

"A failure that saved a life, yes."

"What do you mean?" I asked, my relief short-lived.

He showed me the hat. Inside an inspection cover were intricate wires and small flashing lights that looked impressive.

"Someone has wired the retextualizing inhibitor to the ISBN Code rectifiers. If the cord had been pulled, there would have been an overheat in the primary booster coils."

"Overheat? My head would have got hot?"

"More than hot. Enough energy would have been released to write about fourteen novels."

"I'm an apprentice, Plum, tell me in simple terms."

He looked at me seriously. "There wouldn't be much left of the hat--or the person wearing it. It happens occasionally on the Mk VII's--it would have been seen as an accident. Good thing there *was* a broken cord."

He whistled low. "Nifty piece of work, too. Someone who knew what they were doing."

"That's very interesting," I said slowly. "Can you give me a list of people who might have been able to do this sort of work?"

"Take a few days."

"Worth the wait. I'll call back."

I met up with Miss Havisham and the Bellman in the Jurisdiction offices.

The Bellman nodded a greeting and consulted his ever-present clipboard. "Looks like a dog day, ladies."

"Thurber again?"

"No, *Mansfield Park*. Lady Bertram's pet pug has been run over and needs to be replaced."

"Again?" replied Havisham. "That must be the sixth. I wish she'd be more careful."

"Seventh. You can pick it up from stores."

He turned his attention to me. "Miss Havisham says you are



ready to take the practical test to bring you up from apprentice to restricted agent."

"I'm ready," I replied, thinking I was anything but.

"I'm sure you are," answered the Bellman thoughtfully, "but it is a bit soon--if it wasn't for the shortage caused by Mrs. Nakajima's retirement, I think you would remain as an apprentice for a few more months. Well," he sighed, "can't be helped. I've had a look at the duty roster and I think I've found an assignment that should test your mettle. It's an Internal Plot Adjustment order from the Council of Genres."

Despite my natural feelings of caution, I was also, to my shame, *excited* by a practical test of my abilities. Dickens? Hardy? Perhaps even Shakespeare.

"*Shadow the Sheepdog*," announced the Bellman, "by Enid Blyton. It needs to have a happy ending."

"*Shadow . . . the Sheepdog*," I repeated slowly, hoping my disappointment didn't show. Blyton wasn't *exactly* high literature, but on reflection, perhaps that was just as well.

"Okay," I said more enthusiastically, "what do you want me to do?"

"Simple. As the story stands, Shadow is blinded by the barbed wire, so he can't be sold to the American film producer. Up ending because he isn't sold, down ending because he is blinded and useless. All we need to do is to have him miraculously regain his sight the next time he goes to the vet on page"--he consulted his clipboard--"two thirty-two."

"And," I said cautiously, not wanting the Bellman to realize how unprepared I was, "what plan are we going to use?"

"Swap dogs," replied the Bellman simply. "All collies look pretty much the same."

"What about Vestigial Plot Memory?" asked Havisham. "Do we have any smoothers?"

"It's all on the job sheet." The Bellman tore off a sheet of paper and handed it to me. "You do know all about smoothers, of course?"

"Of course!" I replied.

"Good. Any more questions?"

I shook my head.

"Excellent!" exclaimed the Bellman. "Just one more thing.

Bradshaw is investigating the Perkins incident. Would you make sure he gets your reports as soon as possible?"

"Of course!"

"Er . . . Good."

He made a few "must get on" noises and left.

As soon as he had gone, I said to Havisham, "Do you think I'm ready for this, ma'am?"

"Thursday," she said in her most serious voice, "listen to me. Jurisfiction has need of agents who can be trusted to do the right thing." She looked around the room. "Sometimes it is difficult to know whom we can trust. Sometimes the sickeningly self-righteous--like you--are the last bastion of defense against those who would mean the BookWorld harm."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you can stop asking so many questions and do as you're told--just pass this practical first time. Understand?"

"Yes, Miss Havisham."

"That's settled, then. Anything else?"

"Yes. What's a smoother?"

"Do you not read your TravelBook?"

"It's quite long," I pleaded. "I've been consulting it whenever possible but still got no further than the preface."

"Well," she began as we jumped to Wemmick's Stores in the lobby of the Great Library, "plots have a sort of inbuilt memory. They can *spring* back to how they originally ran with surprising ease."

"Like time," I murmured, thinking about my father.

"If you say so. On Internal Plot Adjustment duties we often have to have a smoother--a secondary device that reinforces the primary plot swing. We changed the end of Conrad's *Lord Jim*, you know. Originally, he runs away. A bit weak. We thought it would be better if Jim delivered himself to Chief Doramin as he had pledged following Brown's massacre."

"That didn't work?"

"No. The chief kept on forgiving him. We tried everything. Insulting the chief, tweaking his nose--after the forty-third attempt we were getting desperate; Bradshaw was almost pulling his hair out."

"So what did you do?"

"We retrospectively had the chief's son die in the massacre. It did the trick. The chief had no trouble shooting Jim after that."

I mused about this for a moment. "How did Jim take it? The decision for him to die, I mean?"

"He was the one that asked for the plot adjustment in the first place. He thought it was the only honorable thing to do--mind you, the chief's son wasn't exactly over the moon about it."

"Ah," I said, pondering that here in the BookWorld the pencil of life occasionally *did* have an eraser on the other end.

"So you'll send a check for a hundred pounds to the farmer and buy his pigs for double the market rate--that way, he won't need the cash and won't want to resell Shadow to the film producer. Get it? Good afternoon, Mr. Wemmick."

We had arrived at the stores. Wemmick himself was a short man, a native of *Great Expectations*, aged about forty with a pockmarked face. He greeted us enthusiastically.

"Good afternoon, Miss Havisham, Miss Next--I trust all is well?"

"Quite well, Mr. Wemmick. I understand you have a few canines for us?"

"Indeed," replied the storekeeper, pointing to where two dogs were attached to a hook in the wall by their leads.

"Pug, Lady Bertram's, to be replaced, one. Shadow, sheepdog, sighted, to swap with existing dog, blind, one. Check for the farmer, value one hundred pounds sterling, one. Cash to buy pigs, forty-two pounds, ten shillings and fourpence. Sign here."

The two dogs panted and wagged their tails. The collie had his eyes bound with a bandage.

"Any questions?"

"Do we have a cover story for this check?" I asked.

"Use your imagination. I'm sure you'll think of something."

"Wait a moment," I said, alarm bells suddenly ringing, "aren't you coming with me to supervise?"

"Not at all!" Havisham grinned with a strange look in her eye. "Assessed work has to be done solo; I'll mark you on your report and the successful--or not--realigned story within the

book. This is so simple even *you* can't mess it up."

"Couldn't I do Lady Bertram's pug?" I asked, trying to make it sound like something hard and of great consequence.

"Out of the question! Besides, I don't do children's books anymore--not after the incident with Larry the Lamb. But since *Shadow* is out of print, no one will notice if you make a pig's ear of it. Remember that Jurisfiction is an honorable establishment and you should reflect that in your bearing and countenance. Be resolute in your work and fair and just. Destroy grammasites with extreme prejudice--and shun any men with amorous intentions."

She thought for a moment. "Or *any* intentions, come to that. Have you got your TravelBook to enable you to jump back?"

I patted my breast pocket where the slim volume was kept and she was gone, only to return a few moments later to swap dogs and vanish again. I read my way diligently to the second floor of the Library and picked *Shadow the Sheepdog* off the shelf. I paused. I was nervous and my palms had started to sweat. I scolded myself. How hard could a plot adjustment in an Enid Blyton be? I took a deep breath and, notwithstanding the simplistic nature of the novel, opened the slim volume with an air of serious trepidation--as though it were *War and Peace*.

*Shadow the Sheepdog*

*Shadow the Sheepdog*, the story of a supremely loyal and intelligent sheepdog in a rural prewar countryside, was published by Collins in 1950. A compulsive scribbler from her early teens, Enid Blyton found escape from her own unhappy childhood in the simple tales she wove for children. She has been republished in revised forms to suit modern tastes and has consistently remained popular over five decades. The independently minded children of her stories live in an idealized world of eternal summer holidays, adventure, high tea, ginger beer, cake and grown-ups with so little intelligence that they need everything explained to them--something that is not so very far from the truth.

MILLON DE FLOSS,  
*Enid Blyton*

I READ MYSELF INTO *Shadow's* featured town halfway down page 231. Johnny, the farmer's boy who was *Shadow's* owner and coprotagonist, would be having *Shadow's* eyes checked in a few days, so a brief reconnaissance of the locality seemed like a good idea. If I could *persuade* rather than order the vet to swap the dogs, then so much the better. I alighted in a town that looked like some sort of forties English rural idyll--a mix between Warwickshire and the Dales. All green grass, show-quality cattle, yellow-lichened stone walls, sunshine and healthy-looking, smiling people. Horses pulled carts laden high with hay down the main street, and the odd shiny motorcar pattered past. Pies cooled on windowsills and children played with hoops and tinplate steam engines. The smell in the breeze was of freshly mown grass, clean linen and cooking. Here was a world of high tea, tasty trifles, zero crime, eternal summers and boundless good health. I suspected living here might be quite enjoyable--for about a week.

I was nodded at by a passerby.

"Beautiful day!" she said politely.

"Yes. My--"

"Rain later?"

I looked up at the puffy clouds that stretched away to the horizon. "I shouldn't have thought so, but can you--"

"Well, be seeing you!" said the woman politely, and was gone.

I found an alleyway and tied the sheepdog to a downpipe; it was neither useful nor necessary to lead a dog around town for the next few hours. I walked carefully down the road, past a family butcher's, a tearoom and sweetshop selling nothing but gobstoppers, bull's-eyes, ginger beer, lemonade and licorice. A few doors farther on I found a newsagent and post office combined. The outside of the small shop was liberally covered with enamel signs advertising Fry's chocolates, Colman's starch, Wyncarnis tonic, Ovaltine and Lyons cakes. A small sign told me I could use the telephone, and a rack of postcards shared the pavement with boxes of fresh veg. There was also a display of newspapers, the headlines reflecting the interwar politics of the book.

*Britain Voted Favorite Empire Tenth Year Running*, said one. *Foreigners Untrustworthy, Study Shows*, said another. A third led with *"Spiffing"--New Buzzword Sweeps Nation*.

I posted the "smoother" check to Johnny's father with a covering letter explaining that it was an old loan repaid. Almost immediately a postman appeared on a bicycle and removed the letter--the only one in the postbox, I noted--with the utmost of reverence, taking it into the post office where I could hear cries of wonderment. There weren't many letters in *Shadow*, I assumed. I stood outside the shop for a moment, watching the townsfolk going about their business. Without warning one of the cart horses decided to drop a huge pile of dung in the middle of the road. In a trice a villager had run across with a bucket and shovel and removed the offending article almost as soon as it had happened. I watched for a while and then set off to find the local auctioneers.

"So let me get this straight," said the auctioneer, a heavysset and humorless man with a monocle screwed into his eye, "you want to buy pigs at treble the going rate? Why?"

"Not anyone's pigs," I replied wearily, having spent the last half hour trying to explain what I wanted, "Johnny's father's

pigs."

"Quite out of the question," muttered the auctioneer, getting to his feet and walking to the window. He did it a lot, I could tell--there was a worn patch right through the carpet to the floorboards beneath, but only from his chair to the window. There was another worn patch from the door to a side table--the use of which I was yet to understand. Considering his limitations, I guessed the auctioneer was no more than a C-9 Generic--it explained the difficulty of persuading him to alter anything.

"We do things to a set formula here," added the auctioneer, "and we don't very much like change."

He walked back across the worn floorboards to his desk, turned to face me and wagged a reproachful finger.

"And believe me, if you try anything a bit rum at the auction, I can discount your bid."

We stared at each other. This wasn't working.

"Tea and cake?" asked the auctioneer, walking to the window again.

"Thank you."

"Splendid!" He rubbed his hands together and returned to his desk. "They tell me there is *nothing* quite so refreshing as a cup of tea!"

He flipped the switch on the intercom. "Miss Pittman, would you bring in some tea, please?"

The door opened instantaneously to reveal his secretary holding a tray of tea things. She was in her late twenties, and pretty in an English rose sort of way; she wore a floral summer dress under a fawn cardigan.

Miss Pittman followed the smoothly worn-down floorboards and carpet from the door to the side table. She curtsied and laid the tea things next to an identical tray left from an earlier occasion. She threw the old tea tray out the window and I heard the soft tinkle of broken crockery; I had seen a large pile of broken tea things outside the window when I arrived.

His secretary paused, hands pressed tightly together. "Shall--shall I pour you a cup?" she asked, a flush rising to her cheeks.

"Thank you!" exclaimed Mr. Phillips, walking excitedly to the window and back again. "Milk and--"

"One sugar." His secretary smiled shyly. "Yes, yes . . . I know."

"But of course you do!" He smiled back.

Then, the next stage of this odd charade took place. The auctioneer and secretary moved to the place where their two worn paths were closest, the outer limits that their existence and limited story line allowed them. Miss Pittman held the cup by its rim, placed her toes right on the edge where the worn carpet began and shiny floorboard ended, stretching out as far as she could. Mr. Phillips did the same on his side of the divide. The tips of his fingers could just touch the opposite rim of the cup, but try as he might, he could not reach far enough to grasp it.

"Allow me," I said, unable to watch the cruel spectacle any longer. I passed the cup from one to the other.

How many cups of tea had gone cold in the past thirty-five years, I wondered, how uncrossable the six feet of carpet that divided them! Whoever event-managed this book down in the Well had a cruel sense of humor.

Miss Pittman curtsied politely and departed while the auctioneer watched her go. He sat down at his desk, eyeing the teacup thirstily. He licked his lips and rubbed his fingertips in expectation, then took a sip and savored the moment lovingly.

"Oh my goodness!" he said deliriously, "Even better than I thought it would be!"

He took another sip and closed his eyes with the sheer delight of it.

"Where were we?" he asked.

I took a deep breath. "I want you to buy Johnny's father's pigs with an offer that purports to come from an unknown buyer--and as close to the top of page two hundred and thirty-two as you can."

"Utterly impossible! You are asking me to change the narrative! I will have to see higher authority."

I passed him my Jurisdiction ID card. It wasn't like me to pull rank, but I was getting desperate.

"I'm on official business sanctioned by the Council of Genres themselves through Text Grand Central." It was how I thought



Miss Havisham might say it.

"You forget that we are out of print pending modernization," he replied shortly, tossing my ID back across the table. "You have no mandatory powers here, *Apprentice* Next. I think Jurisfiction will look very carefully before attempting a change on a book without internal approval. You can tell the Bellman that, from me."

We stared at each other, a diplomatic impasse having arrived.

I had an idea. "How long have you been an auctioneer in this book?"

"Thirty-six years."

"And how many cups of tea have you had in that time?"

"Including this one?"

I nodded.

"One."

I leaned forward. "I can fix it for you to have as many cups of tea as you want, Mr. Phillips."

He narrowed his eyes. "Oh, yes? And how would you manage that? As soon as you've got what you want, you'll be off and I'll never be able to reach Miss Pittman's proffered cup again!"

I stood up and went to the table on which the tea tray was lying. It was a small table made of oak and lightly decorated. It had a vase of flowers on it, but nothing else. As Mr. Phillips watched, I picked up the table and placed it next to the window. The auctioneer looked at me dumbfounded, got up, walked to the window and delicately touched the table and the tea things.

"An audacious move," he said, waving the sugar tongs at me, "but it won't work--she's a D-7--she won't be able to change what she does."

"D-7s never have names, Mr. Phillips."

"I gave her that name," he said quietly, "you're wasting your time."

"Let's see, shall we?" I spoke into the intercom to ask Miss Pittman to bring in more tea.

The door opened as before and a look of shock and surprise crossed the girl's face.

"The table!" she gasped, rattling the Royal Doulton tea things on the tray. "It's--!"

"You can do it, Miss Pittman," I told her, "just place the tea where you always do."

She moved forward, following the well-worn path, arrived at where the table used to be and then looked at its new position, two strides away. The smooth and unworn carpet was alien and fearful to her; it might as well have been a bottomless chasm. She stopped dead.

"I don't understand--!" she began, her face bewildered as her hands continued to shake.

"Tell her to put the tea things down," I told the auctioneer, who was becoming as distressed as Miss Pittman--perhaps more so. *"Tell her!"*

"Thank you, Miss Pittman," murmured Mr. Phillips, his voice croaking with emotion, "put the tea things down over here, would you?"

She bit her lip and closed her eyes, raised her foot and held it, quivering above the edge of the shiny floorboards. Then she moved it forward and rested it on the soft carpet. She opened her eyes, looked down and beamed at us both.

"Well done!" I said. "Just two more."

Brimming with confidence, she negotiated the two remaining steps with ease and placed the tray on the table. She and Mr. Phillips were closer now than they had ever been before. She put out a hand to touch his lapel, but checked herself quickly.

"Shall--shall I pour you a cup?"

"Thank you!" exclaimed Mr. Phillips. "Milk and--"

"One sugar," She smiled shyly. "Yes, yes, I know."

She poured the tea and handed the cup and saucer to him. He took it gratefully.

"Mr. Phillips?"

"Yes?"

"Do I have a first name?"

"Of course," he replied quietly and with great emotion, "I have had over thirty years to think about it. Your name is Aurora, as befits somebody as beautiful as the dawn."

She covered her nose and mouth to hide her smile and

blushed deeply.

Mr. Phillips raised a shaking hand to touch her cheek but stopped as he remembered that I was still present. He nodded imperceptibly in my direction and said, "Thank you, Miss Pittman--perhaps later you might come in for some . . . dictation."

"I will look forward to it, Mr. Phillips!"

And she turned, trod softly on the carpet to the door, looked round once more and went out. When I looked back at Mr. Phillips, he had sat down, drained by the emotionally charged encounter.

"Do we have a deal? Or do I put the table back where it was?"

He looked shocked. "You wouldn't."

"I would."

He considered his position for a moment and then offered me his hand. "Pigs at treble the going rate?"

"Top of page two thirty-two."

"Deal."

Pleased with my actions so far, I collected the dog and jumped forward to the middle of page two thirty-two. By now the sale of Johnny's father's pigs was the talk of the town and had even made it into the headlines of the local papers: *Unprecedented Pig Prices Shock Town*. There was only one thing left to do--replace the blind collie for the sighted one.

"I'm looking for the vet," I asked a passerby.

"Are you?" replied the woman amiably. "Good for you!" and she hurried on.

"Could you tell me the way to the vet?" I asked the next person, a sallow man in a tweed suit.

He was no less literal: "Yes, I could." He attempted to walk on. I tried to grasp him by the sleeve but missed and momentarily clasped his hand. He gasped out loud. This was echoed by two women who had witnessed the incident. They started to gossip volubly. I pulled out my ID.

"Jurisfiction," I told him, adding, "on official business," just to make sure he got the picture.

But something had happened. The townsfolk, who up until

that moment had seemed to wander the streets like automatons, were all of a sudden animated individuals, talking, whispering and pointing. I was a stranger in a strange land, and while the townsfolk didn't *seem* hostile, I was clearly an object of considerable interest.

"I need to get to the vet," I said loudly. "Now, can anyone tell me where he lives?"

The two ladies who had been chattering suddenly smiled and nodded to one another.

"We'll show you where he works."

I left the first man still staring at his hand and looking at me in an odd way. I didn't take offense. People looked at me oddly quite a lot.

I followed the ladies to a small building set back from the road. I thanked them both, one of whom I noticed remained at the gate while the other bustled away with a purposeful stride. I rang the doorbell.

"Hello?" said the vet, opening the door and looking surprised; he only had one client booked that day--Johnny and Shadow. The vet was meant to tell the young lad how Shadow would stay blind forever.

"This dog," said the vet automatically, "will never see again. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is."

"Jurisfiction," I told him, showing him my ID. "There's been a change of plan."

"What sort of change?" he asked as I gently forced my way in and closed the door. "Are you here to alter the less-than-savory references to stereotypical Gypsy folk in chapters thirteen to fifteen?"

"We'll get round to that, don't you worry."

I wasn't going to take any chances and go through the same rigmarole as I had with Mr. Phillips, so I looked around furtively and said in a conspiratorial whisper, "I shouldn't be telling you this, but . . . wicked men are planning to steal Shadow and sell him off for medical experiments!"

"No!" exclaimed the vet, eyes open wide.

"Indeed," I replied, adding in a hushed tone, "and what's more, we suspect that these men might not even be English."

"You mean . . . Johnny Foreigners?" asked the vet, visibly

shocked.

"Probably French. Now, are you with me on this?"

"Absolutely!" he breathed. "What are we going to do?"

"Swap dogs. When Johnny arrives, you tell him to go outside for a moment, we swap the dogs, when he comes back, you unwrap the bandages, the dog can see--and you say this dialogue instead."

I handed him a scrap of paper. He looked at it thoughtfully.

"So Shadow stays here and the *swapped* Shadow is abducted by Johnny Foreigner and used for medical experiments?"

"Something like that. But not a word to anyone, you understand?"

"Word of honor!" replied the vet.

So I gave him the collie, and sure enough, when Johnny brought in the blinded Shadow, the vet told him to go and get some water, we swapped dogs and when Johnny returned, lo and behold, the dog could see again. The vet feigned complete surprise and Johnny, of course, was delighted. They left soon after.

I stepped from the office where I had been hiding.

"How did I do?" asked the vet, washing his hands.

"Perfect. There could be a medal in it for you."

It all seemed to have gone swimmingly well. I couldn't believe my luck. But more than that, I had the feeling that Havisham might actually be quite proud of her apprentice--at the very least this should make up for having to rescue me from the grammasites. Pleased, I opened the door to the street and was surprised to find that a lot of the locals had gathered, and they all seemed to be staring at me. My feeling of euphoria over the completed mission suddenly evaporated as unease welled up inside me.

"It's time! It's time!" announced one of the ladies I had seen earlier.

"Time for what?"

"Time for a wedding!"

"Whose?" I asked, not unreasonably.

"Why *yours*, of course!" she answered happily. "You touched Mr. Townsperson's hand. You are betrothed. *It is the law!*"

The crowd surged towards me and I reached, not for my

gun, but for my TravelBook in order to get out quickly. It was the wrong choice. Within a few moments I had been overpowered. They took my book and gun, then held me tightly and propelled me towards a nearby house, where I was forced into a wedding dress that had seen a lot of previous use and was several sizes too big.

"You won't get away with this!" I told them as they hurriedly brushed and plaited my hair with two men holding my head. "Jurisdiction know where I am and will come after me, I swear!"

"You'll get used to married life," exclaimed one of the women, her mouth full of pins. "They *all* complain to begin with--but by the end of the afternoon they are as meek as lambs. Isn't that so, Mr. Rustic?"

"Aye, Mrs. Passerby," said one of the men holding my arms, "like lambs, meek."

"You mean there were others?"

"There is nothing like a good wedding," said one of the other men, "nothing except--"

Here Mr. Rustic nudged him and he was quiet.

"Nothing except *what*?" I asked, struggling again.

"Oh, hush!" said Mrs. Passerby. "You made me drop a stitch! Do you really want to look a mess on your wedding day?"

"Yes."

Ten minutes later, bruised and with my hands tied behind my back and a garland of flowers in my badly pinned hair, I was being escorted towards the small village church. I managed to grab the lych-gate on the way in but was soon pulled clear. A few moments later I was standing at the altar next to Mr. Townsperson, who was neatly dressed in a morning suit. He smiled at me happily and I scowled back.

"We are gathered here today in the eyes of God to bring together this woman and this man . . ."

I struggled but it was no good.

"This proceeding has no basis in law!" I shouted, attempting to drown out the vicar. He signaled to the verger, who placed a bit of sticking plaster over my mouth. I struggled again, but with four burly farmworkers holding me, it was useless. I watched with a sort of strange fascination as the wedding

proceeded, the villagers sniveling with happiness in the small church. When it came to the vows, my head was vigorously nodded for me, and a ring pressed on my finger.

". . . I now pronounce you man and wife! You may kiss the bride."

Mr. Townsperson loomed closer. I tried to back away but was held tightly. Mr. Townsperson kissed me tenderly on the sticking plaster that covered my mouth. As he did so, an excited murmur went up from the congregation.

There was applause and I was dragged towards the main door, covered in confetti and made to pose for a wedding photograph. For the picture the sticking plaster was removed so I had time to make my protestations.

"No coerced wedding was ever recognized by law!" I bellowed. "Let me go *right now* and I may not report you!"

"Don't worry, Mrs. Townsperson," said Mrs. Passerby, addressing me, "in ten minutes it really won't matter. You see, we rarely get the opportunity to perform nuptials as no one in here ever gets married--the Well never went so far as to offer us that sort of luxury."

"What about the others you mentioned?" I asked, a sense of doom rising within me. "Where are the other brides who were forced into marriage?"

Everyone looked solemn, clasped their hands together and stared at the ground.

"What's going on? What will happen in ten minutes?"

I turned as the four men let go of me and saw the vicar again. But he wasn't cheery this time. He was solemn, and well he might be. Before him was a freshly dug grave. *Mine*.

"Oh my God!" I muttered.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered . . . ," began the vicar as the same townsfolk began to sniffle into their hankies again. But this time the tears weren't of happiness--they were of *sorrow*.

I cursed myself for being so careless. Mr. Townsperson had my automatic and released the safety. I looked around desperately. Even if I had been able to get a message to Havisham, I doubted whether she could have made it in time.

"Mr. Townsperson," I said in a quiet voice, staring into his

eyes, "my own husband! You would kill your bride?"

He trembled slightly and glanced at Mrs. Passerby. "I'm . . . I'm afraid so, my dear," he faltered.

"Why?" I asked, stalling for time.

"We need the . . . need the--"

"For Panjandrum's sake get on with it or I shall!" snapped Mrs. Passerby, who seemed to be the chief instigator of all this. "I need my emotional fix!"

"Wait!" I said. "You're after *emotion*?"

"They call us *sentiment junkies*," said Mr. Townsperson sadly. "It's not our fault. We are all Generics rated between C-7 and D-3; we don't have many emotions of our own but are smart enough to know what we're missing."

"If you don't kill her, I shall!" mumbled Mr. Rustic, tapping my "husband" on the elbow.

He pulled away. "She has a right to know. She is my wife, after all." He looked nervously left and right.

"Go on."

"We started with humorous one-liners that offered a small kick. That kept us going for a few months, but soon we wanted more: laughter, joy, happiness in any way we could get it. Thrice-monthly garden fetes, weekly harvest festivals and tombola four times a day were not enough; we wanted . . . the *hard stuff*."

"Grief," murmured Mrs. Passerby, "grief, sadness, sorrow, loss--we wanted it but we wanted it *strong*. Ever read *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*?"

I nodded.

"We wanted that. Our hearts raised by the happiness of a wedding and then dashed by the sudden death of the bride!"

I stared at the slightly crazed Generics. Unable to generate emotions synthetically from within the confines of their happy rural idyll, they had embarked upon a systematic rampage of enforced weddings and funerals to give them the high they desired. I looked at the graves in the churchyard and wondered how many others had suffered this fate.

"We will all be devastated by your death, of course," whispered Mrs. Passerby, "but we will get over it--the slower the better!"



"Wait!" I said. "I have an idea!"

"We don't want ideas, my love," said Mr. Townsperson, pointing the gun at me again, "we want *emotion*."

"How long will this fix last?" I asked him. "A day? How sad can you be for someone you barely know?"

They all looked at one another. I was right. The fix they were getting by killing and burying me would last them until teatime if they were lucky.

"You have a better idea?"

"I can give you more emotion than you know how to handle, feelings so strong you won't know what to do with yourselves."

"She's lying!" cried Mrs. Passerby dispassionately. "Kill her now--I can't wait any longer! I need the sadness! Give it to me!"

"I'm Jurisdiction. I can bring more jeopardy and strife into this book than a thousand Blytons could give you in a lifetime!"

"You could?" echoed the townspeople excitedly, lapping up the expectation I was generating.

"Yes--and here's how I can prove it. Mrs. Passerby?"

"Yes?"

"Mr. Townsperson told me earlier he thought you had a fat arse."

"He said *what*?" she replied angrily, her face suffused with joy as she fed off the hurt feelings I had generated.

"I most certainly said no such thing!" blustered Mr. Townsperson, obviously getting a big hit himself from the indignation.

"Us, too!" yelled the townsfolk excitedly, eager to see what else I had in my bag of goodies.

"Nothing before you untie me!"

They did so with great haste; sorrow and happiness had kept them going for a long time, but they had grown bored--I was here like a dealer, offering new and different experiences.

I asked for my gun and was handed it, the townspeople watching me expectantly like a dodo waiting for marshmallows.

"For a start," I said, rubbing my wrists and throwing the wedding ring aside, "I can't remember who got me pregnant!"

There was a sudden silence.

"Shocking!" said the vicar. "Outrageous, morally repugnant--mmmm!"

"But better than that," I added, "if you had killed me, you would also have killed my unborn son--guilt like that could have lasted for months!"

"Yes!" yelled Mr. Rustic. "Kill her now!"

I pointed the gun at them and they stopped in their tracks.

"You'll always regret not having killed me," I murmured.

The townsfolk went quiet and mused upon this, the feeling of loss coursing through their veins.

"It feels wonderful!" said one of the farmworkers, taking a seat on the grass to focus his mind more carefully on the strange emotional potpourri of a missed opportunity of double murder.

But I wasn't done yet. "I'm going to report you to the Council of Genres and tell them how you tried to kill me--you could be shut down and reduced to text!"

I had them now. They all had their eyes closed and were rocking backwards and forwards, moaning quietly.

"Or perhaps," I added, beginning to back away, "I won't."

I pulled off the wedding dress at the lych-gate and looked back. The townspeople were laid out on the ground, eyes closed, surfing their inner feelings on a cocktail of mixed emotions. They wouldn't be down for days.

I picked up my jacket and TravelBook on the way to the vet's, where the blind Shadow was waiting for me. I had completed the mission, even if I had come a hairsbreadth from a sticky end. I could do better, and would, given time. I heard a low, growly voice close at hand.

"What happens to me? Am I reduced to text?"

It was Shadow.

"Officially, yes."

"I see. And unofficially?"

I thought for a moment.

"Do you like rabbits?"

"Rather."

I pulled out my TravelBook.

"Good. Give me your paw. We're off to Rabbit Grand Central."

## Ibb and Obb Named and *Heights* Again

**BookStackers:** To rid a book of the mispeling vyrus, many thousands of dictionaries are moved into the offending novel and stacked either side of the outbreak as a *mispeling barrage*. The wall of dictionaries is then moved in, paragraph by paragraph, until the vyrus is forced into a single sentence, then a word, then smothered completely. The job is done by BookStackers, usually D-grade Generics, although for many years the Anti-mispeling Fast Response Group (AFRG) has been manned by over five thousand WOLP-surplus Mrs. Danvers. (See *Danvers, Mrs., Over-production of.*)

CAT FORMERLY KNOWN AS CHESHIRE,  
*Guide to the Great Library*

IT WAS THREE days later. I had just had my early-morning vomit and was lying back in bed, staring at Gran's note and trying to make sense of it. One word. *Remember*. What was I meant to remember? She hadn't yet returned from the Medici court, and although the note might have been the product of a Granny Next "fuzzy moment," I still felt uneasy. There was something else. Beside my bed was a sketch of an attractive man in his late thirties. I didn't know who he was--which was odd, because I had sketched it.

There was an excited knock at the door. It was Ibb. It had been looking more feminine all week and had even gone so far as to put on haughty airs all day Wednesday. Obb, on the other hand, had been insisting it was right about everything, knew everything, and had sulked when I proved it wrong, and we all knew where *that* was leading.

"Hello, Ibb," I said, placing the sketch aside, "how are you?"

Ibb replied by unzipping and opening the top of its overalls.

"Look!" she said excitedly, showing me her breasts.

"Congratulations," I said slowly, still feeling a bit groggy, "you're a *her*."

"I know!" said Ibb, hardly able to contain her excitement.

"Do you want to see the rest?"

"No, thanks, I believe you."

"Can I borrow a bra?" she asked, moving her shoulders up and down. "These things aren't terribly comfortable."

"I don't think mine would fit you," I said hurriedly, "you're a lot bigger than I am."

"Oh," she answered, slightly crestfallen, then added, "How about a hair tie and a brush? I can't do a thing with this hair. Up, down--perhaps I should have it cut--and I so wish it were curly!"

"Ibb, it's fine, really."

"*Lola*," she corrected me, "I want you to call me Lola from now on."

"Very well, Lola, sit on the bed."

So Lola sat while I brushed her hair and she nattered on about a weight-loss idea she had had, which seemed to revolve around weighing yourself with one foot on the scale and one on the floor. Using this idea, she told me, she could lose as much weight as she wanted and not give up cakes. Then she started talking about this great new thing that she had discovered that was so much fun she thought she'd be doing it quite a lot--and she reckoned she'd have no trouble getting men to assist.

"Just be careful," I told her. "Think before you do what you do with whom." It was advice my mother had given me. I expected Lola would ignore it as much as I had.

"Oh, yes," Lola assured me, "I'll be very careful--I'll always ask them their name first."

When I had finished, she stared at herself in the mirror for a moment, gave me a big hug and skipped out the door. I dressed slowly and walked into the kitchen.

Obb was sitting at the table painting a Napoleonic cavalry officer the height of a pen top. He was gazing intently at the miniature horseman and glowering with concentration. He had developed into a dark-haired and handsome man of at least six foot three over the past few days, with a deep voice and measured speech; he also looked about fifty. I suspected it was now a *he* but hoped he wouldn't try to demonstrate it in the same way that Lola had.

"Morning, Obb," I said, "breakfast?"

He dropped the horseman on the floor.

"Now look what you've made me do!" he growled, adding, "Toast, please, and coffee--and it's *Randolph*, not Obb."

"Congratulations," I told him, but he only grunted in reply, found the cavalry officer and carried on with his painting.

Lola bounced into the living room, saw Randolph and stopped for a moment to stare at her nails demurely, hoping he would turn to look at her. He didn't. So she stood closer and said:

"Good morning, Randolph."

"Morning," he grunted without looking up, "how did you sleep?"

"Heavily."

"Well, you would, wouldn't you?"

She missed the insult and carried on jabbering. "Wouldn't yellow be prettier?"

Randolph stopped and stared at her. "*Blue* is the color of a Napoleonic cavalry officer, Lola. Yellow is the color of custard--and bananas."

She turned to me and pulled a face, mouthed *square* and then helped herself to coffee.

"Can we go shopping, then?" she asked me. "If we are buying underwear, we might as well get some makeup and some scent; we could try on clothes and generally do girl sort of things together--I could take you out to lunch and gossip a lot, have our hair done and then shop some more, talk about boyfriends and perhaps after that go to the gym."

"It's not *exactly* my sort of thing," I said slowly, trying to figure out what sort of book St. Tabularasa's had thought Lola might be most suitable for. I couldn't remember the last time I had a girls' day out--certainly not this decade. Most of my clothes came mail order--when did I ever have time for shopping?

"Oh, go *on*!" said Lola. "You could do with a day off. What were you doing yesterday?"

"Attending a course on bookjumping using the ISBN positioning system."

"And the day before?"

"Practical lessons in using textual sieves as PageRunner capturing devices."

"And before that?"

"Searching in vain for the Minotaur."

"*Exactly* why you need a break. We don't even have to leave the Well--the latest Grattan catalog is still under construction. We can get in because I know someone who's got a part-time job as a text-justifying engineer. Please say yes. It means so much to me!"

I sighed. "Well, all right--but after lunch. I've got to do my Mary Jones thing in *Caversham Heights* all morning."

Lola jumped up and down and clapped her hands with joy. I had to smile at her childish exuberance.

"You might move up a size, too," said Randolph.

She narrowed her eyes and turned to face him. "And *what* do you mean by that?" she asked angrily.

"Exactly what I said."

"That I'm fat?"

"You said it, not me," replied Randolph, concentrating on his metal soldier.

She picked up a glass of water and poured it into his lap.

"*What the hell did you do that for!*" he spluttered, getting up and grabbing a tea towel.

"To teach you," yelled Lola, wagging a finger at him, "that you can't say *whatever* you want, to *whoever* you want!"

And she walked out.

"What did I say?" said Randolph in an exasperated tone. "Did you see that? She did that for no reason at all!"

"I think you got off lightly," I told him. "I'd go and apologize if I were you."

He thought about this for a few seconds, lowered his shoulders and went off to find Lola, whom I could hear sobbing somewhere near the stern of the flying boat.

"Young love!" said a voice behind me. "Eighteen years of emotions packed into a single week--it can't be easy, now can it?"

"Gran!" I said, whirling round. "When did you get back?"

"Just now." She removed her gingham hat and gloves and passed me some cash.

"What's this?"

"D-3 Generics are annoyingly literal, but it can pay

dividends--I asked the cabbie to drive backwards all the way here, and by the end of the trip he owed *me* money. How are things?"

"Well," I sighed, "it's like having a couple of teenagers in the house."

Look upon it as training for having your own children." Gran sat down on a chair and sipped at my coffee.

"Gran?"

"Yes?"

"How did you get here? I mean, you are here, aren't you? You're not just a memory, or something?"

"Oh, I'm real all right." She laughed. "You just need a bit of looking after until we sort out Aornis."

"Aornis?"

"Yes," sighed Gran. "Think carefully for a moment."

I mulled the name around in my mind, and sure enough, Aornis came out of the murk like a ship in fog. But the fog was deep, and other things were hidden within--I could feel it.

"Oh, yes," I murmured, "*her*. What else was I meant to remember?"

"Landen."

He came out of the fog, too. The man in the sketch. I sat down and put my head in my hands. I couldn't believe I'd forgotten him.

"I'd regard it a bit like measles," said Gran, patting my back. "We'll cure you of her, never fear."

"But then I have to go and battle with her again, in the real world?"

"Mnemonomorphs are always easier to contain on the physical plane. Once you have beaten her in your mind, the rest should be easy."

I looked up at her. "Tell me again about Landen."

And she did, for the next hour--until it was time for me to stand in for Mary Jones again.

I drove into Reading in Mary's car, past red minis, blue Morris Marinas and the ubiquitous Spongg Footcare trucks. I had visited the real Reading on many occasions in my life, and although the *Heights* Reading was a fair *impression*, the town



was lacking in detail. A lot of roads were missing, the library was a supermarket, the Caversham district was a lot more like Beverly Hills than I remember and the very grotty downtown was more like New York in the seventies. I think I could guess where the author got his inspiration; I suppose it was artistic license--something to increase the drama.

I stopped in a traffic jam and drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. Our investigation of Perkins's death had not made much progress. Bradshaw had found the partially molten padlock and key in the remnants of the castle keep, but it didn't tell us any more. Havisham and I were not having much better luck ourselves: after three days of discreet investigation, only two pieces of information had come to light: Firstly, that only eight members of Jurisdiction had access to *The Sword of the Zenobians*, and that one of them was Vernham Deane. I mention this because he was posted as missing following an excursion into *Ulysses* to try to figure out what had happened to the stolen punctuation in the final chapter, and no one had seen him since. Successive sweeps of *Ulysses* had failed to show that he had been there at all. In the absence of any more information, Havisham and I had started to discuss the possibility that Perkins might have removed the padlock himself--to clean out the cage or something, although this seemed doubtful. And what about my sabotaged Eject-O-Hat? Neither Havisham nor I had any more idea why I should be considered a threat; as Havisham delighted in pointing out, I was "completely unimportant."

But the big news that had emerged in the past few days was that the time of the UltraWord™ upgrade had been set. Text Grand Central had brought the date forwards a fortnight to coincide with the 923rd Annual BookWorld Awards. During the ceremony Libris would inaugurate the new system before an audience of seven million invited characters. The Bellman told us he had been up to Text Grand Central and seen the new UltraWord™ engines for himself. Sparkling new, each engine could process about a thousand simultaneous readings of each book--the old V8.3 engines were lucky to top a hundred.

I wound down the window and looked out. Traffic jams in Reading weren't uncommon, but they usually moved a *little* bit, and this one had been solid for twenty minutes. Exasperated, I got out of the car and went to have a look. Strangely, there appeared to have been an accident. I say strangely because all the drivers and pedestrians inside *Caversham Heights* were only Generic D-2s to D-9s, and anything as dramatic as an accident was quite outside their brief. As I walked past the eight blue Morris Marinas in front of me, I noticed that each one had an identically damaged front wing and shattered windscreen. By the time I reached the head of the queue, I could see that the incident involved one of the white Spong Footcare trucks. But this truck was different from the others. Usually, they were unwashed Luton-bodied Fords with petrol streaks near the filler cap and a scratched rollershutter at the rear. This truck had none of these--it was pure white, very boxy and without a streak of dirt on it anywhere. The wheels, I noticed, weren't strictly round, either--they were more like a fifty-sided polygon, which gave an impression of a circle. I looked closer. The tires had no surface detail or texture. They were just flat black, without depth. The driver was no more detailed than the truck; he--or she or it--was pink and cubist with simple features and a pale blue boilersuit. The truck had been turning left and had hit one of the blue Morris Marinas, damaging all of them identically. The driver, a gray-haired man wearing herringbone tweed, was trying to remonstrate with the cubist driver but without much luck. The truck driver turned to face him, tried to speak but then gave up and looked straight ahead, going through the motions of driving the truck even though he was stationary.

"What's going on?" I asked the small crowd that had gathered.

"This idiot turned left when he shouldn't have," explained the gray-haired Morris Marina driver while his identical gray-haired Generic D-4 clones nodded their heads vigorously. "We could all have been killed!"

"Are you okay?" I said to the cubist driver, who looked blankly at me and attempted to change gear.

"I've been driving in *Caversham Heights* since the book was written and never had an accident," carried on the Morris Marina driver indignantly. "This will play hell with my no-claims bonus--and what's more, I can't get any sense out of *him* at all!"

"I saw it all," said another Spong truck driver--a proper one this time. "Whoever he is he needs to go back to driving school and take a few lessons."

"Well, the show's over," I told them. "Mr. Morris Marina Driver, is your car drivable?"

"I think so," replied the eight identical middle-aged drivers in unison.

"Then get it out of here. Generic Truck Driver?"

"Yes?"

"Find a towrope and get this heap of junk off the road."

He left to do my bidding as the eight Morris Marina drivers drove off in their identically spluttering cars.

I was waving the cars around the stranded truck when there was a crackle in the air. The cubist truck vanished from the roadside, leaving nothing but the faint smell of cantaloupes. I stared at the space left by the truck. The drivers were more than happy that this obstacle to their ordered lives had been removed, and they sounded their horns at me to get out of the way. I examined the area of the road carefully but found nothing except a single bolt made in the same style as the truck--no texture, just the same cubic shape. I walked back to my car, placed it in my bag and drove on.

Jack was waiting for me outside Mickey Finn's Gym, situated above a couple of shops in Coley Avenue. We were there to question a boxing promoter about allegations of fight fixing. It was the best scene in *Caversham Heights*--gritty, realistic--and with good characterization and dialogue. I met Jack slightly earlier while the story was off on a subplot regarding a missing consignment of ketamine, so there was time for a brief word together. *Caversham Heights* wasn't first person--which was just as well, really, as I didn't think Jack had the depth of character to support it.

"Good morning, Jack," I said as I walked up, "how are

things?"

He looked a lot happier than the last time I'd seen him and he smiled agreeably, handing me a coffee in a paper cup.

"Excellent, Mary--I should call you Mary, shouldn't I, just in case I have a slip of the tongue when we're being read? Listen, I went to see my wife, Madeleine, last night, and after a heated exchange of opinions we came to some sort of agreement."

"You're going back to her?"

"Not quite." Jack took a sip of coffee. "But we agreed that if I stopped drinking and never saw Agatha Diesel again, she would consider it!"

"Well, that's a start, isn't it?"

"Yes, but it might not be as simple as you think. I received this in the post this morning."

He handed me a letter. I unfolded it and read:

*Dear Mr. Spratt,*

*It has come to our attention that you may be attempting to give up the booze and reconcile with your wife. While we approve of this as a plot device to generate more friction and inner conflicts, we most strongly advise you not to carry it through to a happy reconciliation, as this would put you in direct contravention of Rule 11c of the Union of Sad Loner Detectives' Code, as ratified by the Union of Literary Detectives, and it will ultimately result in your expulsion from the association with subsequent loss of benefits.*

*I trust you will do the decent thing and halt this damaging and abnormal behavior before it leads to your downfall.*

*P.S. Despite repeated demands, you have failed to drive a classic car or pursue an unusual hobby. Please do so at once or face the consequences.*

"Hmm," I muttered, "it's signed Poi--"

"I know who it's signed by," replied Jack sadly, retrieving the letter. "The union is *very* powerful. They have influence that goes all the way up to the Great Panjandrum. This could hasten the demolition of *Caversham Heights*, not delay it.

Father Brown wanted to renounce the priesthood umpteen times, but, well, the union--"

"Jack, what do *you* want?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

He sighed. "It's not as simple as that. I have a responsibility for the seven hundred eighty-six other characters in this book. Think of it--all those Generics sold off like post-Christmas turkeys or reduced to text. It makes me shudder just to think about it!"

"That might happen anyway, Jack. At least this way we have a fighting chance. Do your own thing. Break *away* from the norm."

He sighed again and ran his fingers through his hair. "But what about the *conflicts*? Isn't that the point of being a loner detective? The appalling self-destruction, the inner battles within ourselves that add spice to the proceedings and enable the story to advance more interestingly? We can't just have setup-murder-interview-interview-second murder-conjecture-interview-more conjecture-false ending-third murder-dramatic twist-resolution, can we? Where's the interest if a detective *doesn't* get romantically involved with someone who has something to do with the first murder? Why, I might never have to make a choice between justice and my own personal feelings ever again!"

"And what if you don't?" I persisted. "It needn't be like that. There's more than one way to make a story interesting."

"Okay, let's say I *do* live happily with Madeleine and the kids--what am I going to do for subplots? Conflict, for want of a better word, is good. Conflict is right. Conflict *works*."

He gazed at me angrily, but I knew he still believed in himself--that we were even having this conversation proved that.

"It doesn't have to be marital conflicts," I told him. "We could get a few subplots from the Well and sew them in--I agree the action can't always stay with you, but if we--Hello, I think we've got company."

A pink Triumph Herald had pulled up with a middle-aged woman in it. She got out, walked straight up to Jack and

slapped him hard in the face.

"How dare you!" she screamed. "I waited three hours for you at the Sad and Single wine bar--what happened?"

"I told you, Agatha. I was with my wife."

"Sure you were," she spat, her voice rising. "Don't patronize me with your pathetic little lies--who are you screwing this time? One of those little tarts down at the station?"

"It's true," he replied in an even voice, more shocked than outraged. "I told you last night--it's all over, Agatha."

"Oh, yes? I suppose *you* put him up to this?" she said, looking at me, scorn and anger in her eyes. "You come down here on a character exchange with your Outlander airs and self-determination bullshit and think you can improve the story line? The supreme arrogance of you people!"

She stopped for a moment and narrowed her eyes. "You're sleeping together, aren't you?"

"No," I told her firmly, "and if there aren't some improvements round here soon, there won't be a book. If you want a transfer out of here, I'm sure I can arrange something--"

"It's all so easy for you, isn't it?" she said, her face convulsing with anger and then fear as her voice rose. "Think you can just make a few footnoterphone calls and everything will be just dandy?" She pointed a long bony finger at me. "Well, I'll tell you, Miss Outlander, I will *not* take this lying down!"

She glared at us both, marched back to her car and drove off with a squeal of tires.

"How about that for a conflictual subplot?" I asked, but Jack wasn't amused.

"Let's see what else you can dream up--I'm not sure I like that one. Did you find out when the Book Inspectorate are due to read us?"

"Not yet."

Jack looked at his watch. "Come on, we've got the fight-rigging scene to do. You'll like this one. Mary was sometimes a little late with the 'If you don't know, we can't help you' line when we did the old good-cop/bad-cop routine, but just stay on your toes and you'll be fine."

He seemed a lot happier having stood up to Agatha, and we walked across the road to where some rusty iron stairs led up

to the gym.

Reading, Tuesday. It had been raining all night and the rain-washed streets reflected the dour sky. Mary and Jack walked up the steel steps that led to Mickey Finn's. A lugubrious gym that smelt of sweat and dreams, where hopefuls tried to spar their way out of Reading's underclass. Mickey Finn was an ex-boxer himself, with scarred eyes and a tremor to prove it. In latter days he was a trainer, then a manager. Today he just ran the gym and dabbled in drugs on the side.

"Who are we here to see?" asked Mary as their feet rang out on the iron treads.

"Mickey Finn," replied Jack. "He got caught up in some trouble a few years ago and I put in a good word. He owes me."

They reached the top and opened the doo--

It was a good job the door opened outwards. If it had opened inwards, I would not be here to tell the tale. Jack teetered on the edge and I grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back. The only part of Mickey Finn's that remained were short floorboards that changed to descriptive prose less than a foot out, the ragged ends whipping and fluttering like pennants in the wind. Beyond these remnants was nothing but a dizzying drop to a bleak and windswept sea, whipped up into a frenzy by a typhoon. The waves rose and fell, carrying with them small ships that looked like trawlers, the sailors on board covered in oilskins. But the sea wasn't water as I knew it, the waves here were made of *letters*. Every now and then they would coalesce and a word or sentence would burst enthusiastically from the surface, where it would be caught by the sailors who held nets on long poles.

"Blast!" said Jack. "Damn and blast!"

"What is it?" I asked as a word that spelled *saxophone* came barreling towards us, changing to a *real* saxophone as it crossed the threshold and hit the ironwork of the staircase with a crash. The clouds of individual letters in the sky above the wave-tossed sea contained punctuation marks that swirled in ugly patterns. Now and then a bolt of lightning struck the

sea and the letters swirled near the point of discharge, spontaneously creating words.

"The Text Sea!" yelled Jack against the rush of wind. We attempted to close the door against the gale as a grammasite flew past with a loud "Gark!" and expertly speared a verb that had jumped from the sea at a badly chosen moment.

We pressed our weight against the door and it closed. The wind abated, the thunder now merely a distant rumble behind the half-glazed door. I picked up the bent saxophone.

"I had no idea the Text Sea looked like anything at all," I said, panting. "I thought it was just an abstract notion."

"Oh, it's real all right," replied Jack, picking up his hat, "as real as anything is down here. The LiteraSea is the basis for all prose written in roman script. It's connected to the Searyllic Ocean somewhere, but I don't know the details. You know what this means, don't you?"

"That scene stealers have been at work?"

"It looks more like a deletion to me," replied Jack grimly, "excised. The whole kerfuffle. Characters, setting, dialogue, subplot and the narrative-turning device regarding the fight-fixing that the writer had pinched from *On the Waterfront*."

"Where to?"

"Probably to another book by the same author," sighed Jack. "Kind of proves we won't be long for the Well. It's the next nail in the coffin."

"Can't we just jump into the next chapter and the discovery of the drug dealer shot dead when the undercover buy goes wrong?"

"It would never work," said Jack, shaking his head. "Let me see--I wouldn't have known about Hawkins's involvement with Davison's master plan. More importantly, Mickey Finn would have no reason to be killed if he didn't talk to me, so he would have been there to stop the fight before Johnson placed his three-hundred-thousand-pound bet--and the heartwarming scene in the last two pages of the book with the young lad will make no sense unless I meet him here first. Shit. There isn't a holesmith anywhere in the Well who can fill this one. We're finished, Thursday. As soon as the book figures the gym scene has gone, the plot will start to spontaneously unravel. We'll



have to declare literary insolvency. If we do it quick, we might be able to get most of the major parts reassigned to another book."

"There must be *something* we can do!"

Jack thought for a moment. "No, Thursday. It's over. I'm calling it."

"Hang on. What if we come in again, but instead of us *both* walking up the stairs, you start at the top, meet me coming up and explain what you have just found out. We jump straight from there to chapter eight and . . . you're looking at me a bit oddly."

"Mary--"

"Thursday."

"Thursday. That would make chapter seven only a page long!"

"Better than nothing."

"It won't work."

"Vonnegut does it all the time."

He sighed. "Okay. Lead on, maestro."

I smiled and we jumped back three pages.

**Reading, Tuesday.** It had been raining all night and the rain-washed streets reflected the dour sky. Mary was late and she met Jack walking down the stairway from an upstairs gymnasium, his feet ringing on the iron treads.

"Sorry I'm late," said Mary, "I had a puncture. Did you meet up with your contact?"

"Y-es," replied Jack. "Had you visited the gym--which you haven't of course--you would have found it a lugubrious place that smells of sweat and dreams, where hopefuls try to spar their way out of Reading's underclass."

"Who were you seeing?" asked Mary as they walked back to her car.

"Mickey Finn, ex-boxer with scarred eyes and a tremor to match. He told me that Hawkins was involved with Davison's master plan. There is talk of a big shipment coming in on the fifth and he also let slip that he was going to see Jethro--the importance of which I won't

understand until later."

"Anything else?" asked Mary, looking thoughtful.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Are you *sure* you're sure?"

"Er . . . No, wait. I've just remembered. There was this young kid there up for his first fight. It could make him. Mickey said he was the best he'd ever seen--he could be a contender."

"Sounds like you had a busy morning," said Mary, looking up at the gray sky.

"The busiest," answered Jack, pulling up his jacket around his shoulders. "Come on, I'll buy you lunch."

The chapter ended and Jack covered his face with his hands and groaned.

"I can't believe I said 'the importance of which I won't understand until later.' They'll never buy it. It's *rubbish!*"

"Listen," I said, "stop fretting. It'll be fine. We just have to hold the book together long enough to figure out a rescue plan."

"What have we to lose?" replied Jack with a good measure of stoicism. "You get up to Jurisdiction and see what you can find out about the Book Inspectorate. I'll hold a few auditions and try to rebuild the scene from memory."

He paused.

"And, Thursday?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks."

I drove back to the flying boat. Having said I wasn't going to get involved with any internal politics, I was surprised by how much of a kinship with *Caversham Heights* I was feeling. Admittedly, the book was pretty dreadful, but it was no worse than the average Farquitt--perhaps I felt this way because it was my home.

"Are we going shopping now?" asked Lola, who had been

waiting for me. "I need something to wear for the BookWorld Awards the week after next."

"Are you invited?"

"We all are," she breathed excitedly. "It's going to be quite an event!"

"It certainly will," I said, going upstairs. Lola followed me and watched from my bed as I changed out of Mary's clothes.

"You're quite important at Jurisfiction, aren't you?"

"Not really," I replied, trying to do up my trouser button and realizing that it was tighter than normal. "Blast!" I said.

"What?"

"My trousers are too small."

"Shrunk?"

"No . . ." I stared into the mirror. There was no doubt about it. I was starting to put on a small amount of girth. I stared at it this way and that and Lola did the same, trying to figure out what I was looking at.

Catalog shopping from the inside was a lot more fun than I had thought. Lola squeaked with delight at all the clothes on offer and tried about thirty different types of perfume before deciding not to buy any at all--she, in common with nearly all bookpeople, had no sense of smell. Watching her was like letting a child loose in a toy store--and her energy to shop was almost unbelievable. It was while we were on the lingerie page that she asked me about Randolph.

"What do you think of him?"

"Oh, he's fine," I replied noncommittally, sitting on a chair and thinking of babies while Lola tried on one bra after another, each of which she seemed to love to bits until the next one. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, I rather like him in a funny kind of way."

"Does he like you?"

"I'm not sure. I think that's why he ignores me and makes jokes about my weight. Men always do that when they're interested. It's called subtext, Thursday--I'll tell you all about it someday."

"Okay," I said slowly, "so what's the problem?"

"He doesn't really have a lot of, well, *charisma*."

"There are lots of men out there, Lola, don't hurry. When I was seventeen, I had the hots for this complete and utter flake named Darren. My mother disapproved, which made him into something of a magnet."

"Ah! What about this bra?"

"I thought the pink suited you better."

"Which pink? There were twelve."

"The sixth pink, just after the tenth black and nineteenth lacy."

"Okay, let's look at that one again." She rummaged through the pile, found what she wanted. "Thursday?"

"Yes?"

"Randolph calls me a tart because I like boys. Do you think that's fair?"

"It's one of the great injustices of life. If he did the same, he'd be toasted as a 'ladies' man.' But, Lola, have you met anyone who you *really* like, someone with whom you'd like to spend more *exclusive* time with?"

"You mean--a boyfriend?"

"Yes."

She paused and looked at herself in the mirror. "I don't think I'm written that way, Thurs. But you know, sometimes--just afterwards, you know--when there is that really nice moment and I'm in his big strong arms and feeling sleepy and warm and contented, I can feel there is something that I need just outside my grasp--something I want but can't have."

"You mean love?"

"No--a Mercedes."

She wasn't joking.<sup>1</sup>

It was my footnoterphone.

"Hang on, Lola--Thursday speaking."<sup>2</sup>

I looked at Lola, who was trying on a basque.

"Yes," I replied, "why?"<sup>3</sup>

"The safe side of what?"<sup>4</sup>

"I see. What can I do for you apart from answering questions about pianos?"<sup>5</sup>

I wasn't busy. Apart from a Jurisfiction session tomorrow at midday, I was clear.

"Sure. Where and when?"<sup>6</sup>

"Okay."

Lola was looking at me mournfully. "Does this mean we'll have to miss out on the gym? We have to go to the gym--if I don't, I'll feel guilty about eating all those cakes."

"What cakes?"

"The ones I'm going to eat on the way to the gym."

"I think you get enough exercise, Lola. But we've got half an hour yet--c'mon, I'll buy you a coffee."

## 21.

### Who Stole the Tarts?

My first adult foray into the BookWorld had not been without controversy. I had entered *Jane Eyre* and changed the ending. Originally, Jane goes off to India with the drippy St. John Rivers, but in the ending that I engineered, Jane and Rochester married. I made the decision from the heart, which I had not been trained to do but couldn't help myself. Everyone liked the new ending but my actions weren't without criticism. Technically I had committed a Fiction Infraction, and I would have to face the music. My first hearing in Kafka's *The Trial* had been inconclusive. The trial before the King and Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland* would not be as strange--it would be stranger.

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*The Jurisfiction Chronicles*

**T**HE GRYPHON WAS a creature with the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion. In his youth he must have been a frightening creature to behold, but in his later years he wore spectacles and a scarf, which somewhat dented his otherwise fearsome appearance.

He was, I was told, one of the finest legal eagles around, and after Snell's death he became head of the Jurisfiction legal team. It was the Gryphon who secured the record payout in the celebrated *Farmer's Wife v. Three Blind Mice* case, and he was instrumental in reducing Nemo's piracy charges to "accidental manslaughter."

The Gryphon was reading my notes when I arrived and made small and incomprehensible noises as he flicked through the pages, grunting here and there and staring at me over his spectacles with large eyes.

"Well!" he said. "We should be in for some fun now!"

"Fun?" I repeated. "Defending a Class II Fiction Infraction?"

"I'm prosecuting a class action for blindness against the Triffids this afternoon," said the Gryphon soberly, "and the Martians' war crimes trial in *War of the Worlds* just drags on and on. Believe me, a Fiction Infraction is fun. Do you want to

see my caseload?"

"No, thanks."

"Okay. We'll see what their witnesses have to say and how Hopkins presents his case. I may decide not to put you on the stand. Please don't do anything stupid like grow--it nearly destroyed Alice's case there and then. And if the Queen orders your head to be cut off, ignore her."

"Okay," I sighed, "let's get on with it."

The King and Queen of Hearts were seated on their thrones when we arrived, but they were the only people in the courtroom who were seemingly composed--Alice's exit two pages earlier had caused a considerable amount of distress to the jury, who were back in their places but were bickering furiously with the foreman, a rabbit who stared back at them, nibbling a large carrot that he had somehow smuggled in.

The Knave of Hearts was being escorted back to the cells, and the tarts--exhibit A--were being taken away and replaced by the original manuscript of *Jane Eyre*. Seated before the King and Queen was prosecuting attorney Mathew Hopkins and a collection of severe-looking birds. He glared at me with barely concealed venom. He looked a lot less amused since we had last crossed swords in *The Trial*, and he hadn't looked particularly amused then. The King was obviously the judge because he wore a large wig, but quite which part the Queen of Hearts was to play in the proceedings, I had no idea.

The twelve jurors calmed down and all started writing busily on their slates.

"What are they doing?" I whispered to the Gryphon. "The trial hasn't even begun yet!"

"Silence in court!" yelled the White Rabbit in a shrill voice.

"Off with her head!" yelled the Queen.

The King put on his spectacles and looked anxiously round to find out who had been talking. The Queen nudged him and nodded in my direction.

"You there!" he said. "You will have your say soon enough, Miss, Miss . . ."

"Next," put in the White Rabbit after consulting his parchment.

"Really?" replied the King with some confusion. "Does that mean we're done?"

"No, Your Majesty," replied the White Rabbit patiently, "her name is Next. *Thursday* Next."

"I suppose you think that's funny?"

"No, indeed, Your Majesty," I replied. "It was the name I was born with."

The jurymen all frantically started to write "It was the name I was born with" on their slates.

"You're an Outlander, aren't you?" said the Queen, who had been staring at me for some time.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Then answer me this: When there are two people and one of them has left, who is left? The person who *is* left or the person who *has* left? I mean, they can't both be left, can they?"

"Herald, read the accusation!" said the King.

On this, the White Rabbit blew three blasts on the trumpet, then unrolled the parchment scroll and read as follows:

"Miss Thursday Next is hereby accused of a Fiction Infraction Class II against the Jurisfiction penal code FAL/0605937 and pursuant to the BookWorld general law regarding continuity of plotlines, as ratified to the Council of Genres, 1584."

"Consider your verdict," said the King to the jury.

"Objection!" cried the Gryphon. "There's a great deal to come before that!"

"Overruled!" shouted the King, adding, "Or do I mean 'sustained'? I always get the two mixed up--it's a bit like is it 'feed a cold and starve a fever' or 'starve a cold and feed a fever'? I never know. At any rate, you may call the first witness."

The White Rabbit blew three more blasts on the trumpet and called out, "First witness!"

The first witness was Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper at Thornfield Hall, Rochester's home. She blinked and looked around the court slowly, smiling at Hopkins and glaring at me. She was assisted into the witness box by an usher who was actually a large guinea pig.

"Do you promise to tell the whole truth and nothing but the



truth?" asked the White Rabbit.

"I do."

"Write that down," the King said to the jury, and the jury eagerly all wrote "write that down" on their slates.

"Mrs. Fairfax," began Hopkins, rising to his feet, "I want you to tell me in your own words the events surrounding Miss Next's intrusion into *Jane Eyre*, starting at the beginning and not stopping until you get to the end."

"And then what?" asked the King.

"Then she may stop," said Hopkins with a trace of annoyance.

"Ah," said the King in the voice of someone who thinks he understands a great deal but is sadly mistaken, "proceed."

For the next two hours we listened to not only Mrs. Fairfax but Grace Poole, Blanche Ingram and St. John Rivers all giving evidence to explain the old ending and how by calling "Jane Jane Jane!" at Jane's bedroom I had changed the narrative completely. The jury tried to keep up with the proceedings, and they wrote as and when directed by the King until there was no more room on their slates and they tried to write on the benches in front of them, and failing that, on each other.

After every witness, the smallest dormouse in the jury was excused for a trip to the bathroom, which gave the Gryphon time to explain to the King--who probably wouldn't have been able to touch his head with his eyes shut--the procedure of the law. When the dormouse returned, the witness was given to the Gryphon for cross-examination, and every time he called, "No further questions." The afternoon wore on and it became hotter in the courtroom. The Queen grew more and more bored and seemed to demand the verdict on a more and more frequent basis, once even asking during a witness's testimony.

And all during this tedious performance, as the characters from *Jane Eyre* came and repeated the truth in front of me, a seemingly endless parade of guinea pigs interrupted the proceedings. Each one was immediately set upon and placed headfirst into a large canvas bag, then ejected from the court. Each time this happened, there followed a quite inordinate amount of confusion, cries and noise. As the din grew to a fever pitch, the Queen would scream "Off with his head! Off

with his head!" as though she were somehow in direct competition with the tumult. By the time another guinea pig had been thrown from the court, Grace Poole had vanished in a cloud of alcoholic vapors, and no one knew where she was.

"Never mind!" said the King with an air of great relief. "Call the next witness." He added in an undertone to the Queen, "Really, my dear, *you* must cross-examine the next witness. It quite makes my forehead ache!"

I watched the White Rabbit as he fumbled over the list and read out at the top of his shrill little voice, "Thursday Next!"

"Excuse me," said the Gryphon, stirring himself from the lethargy he had shown throughout the trial, "but Miss Next will not be giving evidence against herself in this court of law."

"Is that allowed?" asked the King. The jury all looked at one another and shrugged.

"It proves she's guilty!" screamed the Queen. "Off with her head! Off with--"

"It proves nothing of the sort," interrupted the Gryphon. The Queen went scarlet and would probably have exploded had not the King laid his hand on her arm.

"Come come, my dear," he said softly, "you must stay calm. All these orders of execution are probably not good for your hearts."

He chuckled. "Hearts," he said again. "I say, I've made a joke that's rather good, don't you think?"

The jury all laughed dutifully and the brighter ones explained to the more stupid ones what the joke was, and the stupid ones explained to the even stupider ones what a joke actually is.

"Excuse me," said the dormouse again, "may I go to the bathroom?"

"Again?" bellowed the King. "You must have a bladder the size of a peanut."

"A grain of rice, so please Your Majesty," said the dormouse, knees knocking together.

"Very well," said the King, "but make it quick. Now, can we reach a verdict?"

"Now who wants a verdict?" asked the Queen triumphantly.

"There's more evidence to come yet, please Your Majesty," said the White Rabbit, jumping up in a great hurry. "We have to hear from the defense yet."

"The defense?" asked the King wearily. "Haven't we just heard from them?"

"No, Your Majesty," replied the White Rabbit, "that was the prosecution."

"The two always confuse me," replied the King, staring at his feet, "a bit like that 'Overruled' and 'Sustained' malarkey--which was which again?"

"The prosecution rests," said Hopkins, who could see that this trial might last for months if he didn't get a move on, "and I think we have conclusively proved that Miss Next not only changed the ending of *Jane Eyre* but was also premeditated in her actions. This is not a court of opinion, it is a court of law, and there is only one verdict which this court can reach--guilty."

"I told you she was guilty," muttered the King, getting up to leave.

"Please Your Majesty," said the White Rabbit, "that was just the prosecution summing up. You must listen to the defense now."

"Ah!" said the King, sitting down again.

The Gryphon stood up and walked to the jury box. They all recoiled in fear as he scratched his chin with a large paw. The dormouse put up his hand to be excused and was allowed to leave. When he had returned, the Gryphon began.

"The question here is not whether Miss Next took a few textual and narrative liberties with the end of *Jane Eyre*, as my learned friend the prosecution has made so abundantly clear. We admit that she did."

There was a gasp from the jury.

"No, I contend that whilst Miss Next broke the law in a technical sense, she did so for the best possible motives--love."

The Gryphon paused for dramatic effect.

"Love?" said the King, "Is that a defense?"

"Historically speaking," whispered the White Rabbit, "one of the best, Your Majesty."

"Ah!" said the King. "Proceed."

"And not for her own love, either," continued the Gryphon. "She did it so that two others who were in love might stay that way and not be parted. For such things are against the natural order, a court far higher than the court Miss Next faces today."

There was silence, so he continued:

"I contend that Miss Next is a very extraordinary person with a selfless streak that demands the highest leniency from this court. I have only one witness to call, who will prove the veracity of this defense. I call . . . *Edward Rochester!*"

There was a sharp intake of breath and the remaining guinea pig fainted clean away. The clerks of the court, unsure what to do, popped the guinea pig in a sack and sat on it.

"Call Edward Rochester!" cried the White Rabbit in his shrill voice, a demand that was echoed four times in a succession of voices each diminished further by the distance.

We heard his footfalls shuffle on the floor before we saw him, a slightly hesitant stride with the click of a cane for punctuation. He walked slowly into the courtroom with a fragile yet resolute air and scanned the room carefully to gauge, as well as he could, which of the shapes before him were judge and jury and counsel. The change I had wrought upon *Jane Eyre* had not been without its price. Rochester had lost a hand and only had the milkiest vision in one eye only. I put my hand to my mouth as I watched his form shuffle into the silenced courtroom. If I had known the outcome of my actions, would I still have taken them? Acheron's perfidy had been the author of Rochester's ills, but I had been the catalyst.

Edward's face was healed, although badly scarred, but it did no desperate harm to his looks. He took the oath, his features glowering beneath the dark hair that hung in front of his face.

"Excuse me," said the dormouse who was sitting closest to Rochester, "would you sign my slate, please?"

Rochester gave a dour half smile, took the stylus and said, "Name?"

"Geoffrey."

Rochester signed and returned the slate and was instantly handed eleven more, all wiped clean of their carefully written notes.

"Enough!" roared the King. "I will not have my court turned

into a haven for autograph hunters! We pursue the truth here, not celebrities!"

There was dead silence.

"But if you wouldn't mind. . .," said the King, passing down his notebook to Rochester and adding quietly, "It's for my daughter."

"And your daughter's name?" asked Rochester, pen poised.

"Rupert."

Rochester signed the book and passed it back.

"Mr. Rochester," said the Gryphon, "I wonder if you might expound in your own words what Miss Next's actions have done for you?"

The court fell silent. Even the King and Queen were interested to see what Mr. Rochester had to say.

"To me alone?" replied Rochester slowly. "Nothing. For *us*, my own dear sweet Jane and I--everything!"

He clenched the hand that carried his wedding ring, rubbing the band of gold with his thumb, trying to turn his feelings into words.

"What has Miss Next *not* done for us?" he intoned quietly. "She has given us everything we could want. She has released us both from a prison that was not of our making, a dungeon of depression from which we thought we should never be free. Miss Next gave us the opportunity to love and be loved--I can think of no greater gift anyone could have been given, no word in my head can express the thanks that is ours, for her."

There was silence in the courtroom. Even the Queen had fallen quiet and was staring--quite like a fish, I thought--at Rochester.

The Gryphon's voice broke the silence: "Your witness."

"Ah!" said Hopkins, gathering his thoughts. "Tell me, Mr. Rochester, just to confirm one point: Did Miss Next change the end of your novel?"

"Although I am now, as you see, maimed," replied Rochester, "no better than the old lightning-struck chestnut tree in Thornfield orchard, I am happier than I have ever been. Yes, sir, Miss Next changed the ending, and I thank her every evening for it!"

Hopkins smiled. "No further questions."

"Well," said the Gryphon after the court had been adjourned for the King to consider what form the sentence should take. The Queen, unusually for her, had called for acquittal. The word sounded alien on her lips and everyone stared at her with shock and surprise when she said it--Bill the lizard almost choked and had to be slapped on the back.

"The outcome was a foregone conclusion," said the Gryphon, nodding his respect to Hopkins, who was organizing some notes with the White Rabbit, "but I knew Rochester would put on a good show for you. The King and Queen of Hearts may be the stupidest couple to ever preside upon a court, but they are, after all, *Hearts*, and since you were undeniably guilty, we needed a court to show a bit of compassion when it came to sentencing."

"Compassion?" I echoed with some surprise. "With the Queen of 'Off with her head'?"

"It's just her little way," replied the Gryphon, "she never actually executes anyone. I was just worried for a moment that they might try to hold you on remand until the sentencing, but fortunately the King isn't very up on legal terminology."

"What do you think I'll get?"

"Do you know, I have absolutely no idea. Time will tell. I'll see you around, Next!"

I made my way slowly back to the Jurisdiction offices, where I found Miss Havisham.

"How did it go?" she asked.

"Guilty as charged."

"Bad luck. When's the sentencing?"

"Not a clue."

"Might not be for years, Thursday. I've got something for you."

She passed me across the report I had written for her regarding *Shadow the Sheepdog*. I read the mark on the cover, then read it again, then looked at Havisham.

"A-plus-plus Hons?" I echoed incredulously.

"Think I'm being overgenerous?"

"Well, yes," I said, feeling confused. "I was forcibly married and then nearly murdered!"

"Marriage by force is not recognized, Next. But bear this in mind: we've given that particular assignment to every new Jurisfiction apprentice for the past thirty-two years and every single one has failed."

I gaped at her.

"Even Harris Tweed."

"Tweed was married to Mr. Townsperson?"

"Apart from that bit. He didn't even manage to buy the pigs--let alone fool the vet. You did well, Next. Your cause-and-effect technique is good. Needs work, but good."

"Oh!" I said, kind of relieved, then added after a moment's reflection, "But I could have been killed!"

"You wouldn't have been killed. Jurisfiction has eyes and ears everywhere--we're not that reckless with our apprentices. Your multiple-choice mark was ninety-three percent. Congratulations. Pending final submissions to the Council of Genres, you're made."

I thought about this and felt some pride in it, despite knowing in my heart of hearts that this would not be a long appointment--as soon as I could return to the Outland, I would.

"Did you find out anything about Perkins?"

"Nothing," I replied. "Any news of Vernham Deane?"

"Vanished without trace. The Bellman's going to talk to us about it."

"Could the two be related?"

"Perhaps," she said slightly mysteriously. "I'll have to make further inquiries. Ask me again tomorrow."

## 22.

### Crimean Nightmares

**Echolocator:** An artisan who will enter a book close to publication and locate and destroy echoed words in the work. As a general rule, identical words (with exceptions such as names, small words and modified repetitions) cannot be repeated within fifteen words as it interrupts the smooth transfer of images into the reader's mind. (See *Imagino TransferenceDevice User's Manual*, page 782.) Although echoes can be jarring to the eye, they are more jarring when read out loud, which belies their origin from the first OralTrad Operating System. (See also *OralTradPlus, Operating Systems, History of.*)

CAT FORMERLY KNOWN AS CHESHIRE,  
*Guide to the Great Library*

**AH!"** SAID GRAN as I walked in the door. "There you are! How were things at work today?"

"Good and bad," I told her, sitting on a sofa and undoing the top button of my trousers. "The good news is I passed the Jurisfiction practical; the bad news is that I was found guilty of my Fiction Infraction."

"Did they tell you the sentence?"

"I'll have to wait for that."

"Waiting's the worst part," she murmured. "I was up for murder once and the worst part of it all was waiting for the jury to come back with their verdict. Longest eight hours of my life."

"I believe you. Did you go home today?"

She nodded. "I brought you a few bits and bobs. I notice there is no chocolate here in the WOLP--nothing worth eating, anyway."

"Did you find out anything about Yorrick Kaine?"

"Not much," replied Gran, eating the chocolate she had brought for me, "but he's not in hiding or anything. He's bought another publishing house and at the same time trying to rebuild his political career after that *Cardenio* debacle."

"Ah. Where are Lola and Randolph?"

"At a party, I think. You look all done in--why don't you get



an early night?"

"And have what's-her-name pester me?"

Gran looked at me seriously through her large-framed spectacles. "Aornis. It's Aornis. Remember?"

"Yes. Who was my husband again?"

"Landen. He was eradicated by the ChronoGuard, yes?"

I remembered and my heart sank. "Yes," I said in a quiet voice. I had been happy in my nonremembering state, but now I could feel the anger rising again.

"Sometimes I think it would be better if I just forgot, Gran."

"*Never* say that, Thursday!" said Gran so sharply I jumped, and she had to rest for a moment to get her breath back and eat a few more chocolates. "Aornis has no right to take that which does not belong to her, and you must be strong with her, and yourself--retake your memories!"

"Easier said than done, Gran." I tried to grab a chocolate as they were pulled out of my reach. "I want to dream about--"

"Landen."

"--Landen, yes--I want to dream about him again. He's there but we don't talk like we used to."

The door banged open and Randolph walked in. He ignored us both and hung up his coat.

"Randolph?" I said. "You okay?"

"Me?" he said, not looking at either of us. "I'm fine--it's that little tarty little bitchlet who's going to come to a sticky end--she can't talk to a man without wanting to add him to her collection!"

And he walked out.

"Is she all right?" I called after him, but all we heard was the door to their bedroom slam shut. We looked at each other and shrugged.

"Where were we?"

"I was telling you how I never dream about Landen the way I used to. We used to go to the really great memories we shared. We never got to--you know--but it was wonderful--at least I had *some* control of where I went when the 'Sable Goddess' laid down her cloak."

Gran looked at me and patted my hand reassuringly. "You need to make her feel she's winning, Thursday. Lull her into a

trap. She might *think* she is in command, but she's only in your mind and *you* are the one that controls what you think. Our memories are precious and should never be sullied by an outside agent."

"Of course--but how?"

"Well," said Gran, passing me a chocolate she didn't like, "it isn't Aornis up there, my dear, it's only your *memory* of her. She's alone and afraid, too. Without the real Aornis here in the BookWorld she doesn't have so much power; all she can do is try and--"

The door burst open again. This time it was Lola. She looked as though she had been crying. She stopped dead when she saw us.

"Ah!" she said. "Is rat-face shit-for-brains in?"

"Do you mean Randolph?"

"Who else?"

"Then, yes, he is."

"Right!" she announced. "I'll go and sleep over at Nemo's."

She started to leave.

"Wait!" I said. "What's going on?"

She stopped and put her hands on her hips. Her bag slid down and hung off her elbow, which spoiled the illusion, but Lola was past caring.

"I went to meet him for coffee after college, and blow me if he's not talking to that little D-2 runt--you know, the one with the squinty eyes and the stupid, snorty laugh?"

"Lola," I said quietly, "they were probably just talking."

She looked at her hands for a moment. "You're right. And what do I care anyway? They clearly deserve one another!"

"I heard that!" said a voice from the back of the flying boat. Randolph strode into the room and waved a finger at Lola, who glared back angrily.

"You've got a nerve accusing me of being with another woman when you've slept with almost everyone at school!"

"And so what if I have?" screamed Lola. "Who are you, my father? Have you been spying on me?"

"Even the worst spy in the genre couldn't fail to notice what you're up to--don't you know the meaning of the word *discretion*?"

"One-dimensional!"

"Cardboard!"

"Stereotype!"

"Predictable!"

"Jerkoff!"

"*Arsehole!*"

"Duck, Gran," I whispered as Lola picked up a vase and threw it at Randolph. It missed and went sailing over the top of our heads to shatter on the far wall.

"Okay," I said loudly, using my best and most assertive voice, "any more crap out of you two and you can live somewhere else. Randolph. You can sleep on the sofa. Lola, you can go to your room--and if I hear a peep out of either of you, I'll have you both allocated to knitting patterns--*get it?*"

They went quiet, mumbled something about being sorry and walked slowly from the room.

"Oh, that was good, balls-for-brains," muttered Lola as they moved off, "get us both into trouble, why don't you?"

"Me?" he returned angrily. "Your knickers are off so often I'm amazed you bother with them at all."

"*Did you hear me?*" I yelled after them, and there was quiet.

I sat down next to Gran again, who was picking bits of broken vase from the tabletop.

"Where were we?" she asked

"Er . . . retaking my memories?"

"Exactly so. She'll be wanting to try and break you down, so things are going to get worse before they get better--only when she thinks she has defeated you can we go on the offensive."

"What do you mean by getting worse? Hades? Landen's eradication? Darren? How far do I have to go?"

"Back to the worst time of all--the truth about what happened during the charge."

"Anton." I groaned and rubbed my face. "I don't want to go back there, Gran, I can't!"

"Then she'll pick away at your memory until there is nothing left; she doesn't want that--she's after revenge. You *have* to go back to the Crimea, Thursday. Face up to the worst and grow stronger from it."

"No, I won't go back there and you can't make me."

I got up without a word and went to have a bath, trying to soak away the worries. Aornis, Landen, Goliath, the ChronoGuard and now Perkins's and Snell's murders here in the BookWorld; I'd need a bath the size of Windermere to soak those away. I had come to *Caversham Heights* to stay away from crisis and conflict--but they seemed to follow me around like a stray dodo.

I stayed in the bath long enough to need to top it up with hot water twice and, when I came out, found Gran sitting on the laundry basket outside the door.

"Ready?" she asked softly.

"Yes, I'm ready."

I slept in my own bed--Gran said she would sit in the armchair and wake me if things looked as though they were getting out of hand. I stared at the ceiling, the gentle curve of the wooden paneling and the single domed ceiling light. I stayed awake for hours, long after Gran had fallen asleep and dropped her copy of *Tristram Shandy* on the floor. Night and sleep had once been a time of joyous reunion with Landen, a collection of moments that I treasured: tea and hot buttered crumpets, curled up in front of a crackling log fire, or golden moments on the beach, cavorting in slow motion as the sun went down. But no longer. With Aornis about, my memory was now a battleground. And with the whistle of an artillery shell, I was back where I least wanted to be--the Crimea.

"So there you are!" cried Aornis, grinning at me from her seat in the armored personnel carrier as the wounded were removed. I had returned from the lines to the forward dressing station where the disaster had generated a sustained and highly controlled panic. Cries of "Medic!" and swearing punctuated the air while less than three miles away we could still hear the sound of the Russian guns pummeling the remains of the Wessex Light Tank. Sergeant Tozer stepped from the back of the APC with his hand still inside the leg of a soldier as he tried to staunch the bleeding; another soldier

blinded by splinters was jabbering on about some girl he had left back home in Bradford-on-Avon.

"You haven't dreamt for a few nights," said Aornis as we watched the casualties being unloaded. "Have you missed me?"

"Not even an atom," I replied, adding, "Are we done?" to the medics unloading the APC.

"We're done!" came back the reply, and with my foot I flicked the switch that raised the rear door.

"Where do you think you're going?" asked a red-faced officer I didn't recognize.

"To pick up the rest, sir!"

"The hell you are! We're sending in Red Cross trucks under a flag of truce!"

It would take too long and we both knew it. I dropped back into the carrier, revved the engine and was soon heading back into the fray. The amount of dust thrown up might screen me--as long as the guns kept firing. Even so, I still felt the whine of a near miss, and once an explosion went off close by, the concussion shattering the glass in the instrument panel.

"Disobeying a direct order, Thursday?" said Aornis scathingly. "They'll court-martial you!"

"But they didn't. They gave me a medal instead."

"But you didn't go back for a gong, did you?"

"It was my duty. What do you want me to say?"

The noise grew louder as I drove towards the front line. I felt something large pluck at my vehicle and the roof opened up, revealing a shaft of sunlight in the dust that was curiously beautiful. The same unseen hand picked up the carrier and threw it in the air. It ran along on one track for a few yards and then fell back upright. The engine was still functioning, the controls still felt right; I carried on, oblivious to the damage. Only when I reached up for the wireless switch did I realize the roof had been partially blown off, and only later did I discover an inch-long gash in my chin.

"It was your duty, all right, Thursday, but it was not for the army, regiment, brigade or platoon--certainly not English interests in the Crimea. You went back for Anton, didn't you?"

Everything stopped. The noise, the explosions, everything.

My brother Anton. Why did she have to bring him up?

"Anton," I whispered.

"Your dear brother Anton," replied Aornis. "Yes. You worshiped him. From the time he built you a tree house in the back garden. You joined the army to be like him, didn't you?"

I said nothing. It was true, all true. Tears started to course down my cheeks. Anton had, quite simply, been the best elder brother a girl could have. He always had time for me and always included me in whatever he got up to. My anger at losing him had been driving me for longer than I cared to remember.

"I brought you here so you can remember what it's like to lose a brother. If you could find the man that killed Anton, what would you do to him?"

"Losing Anton was *not* the moral equivalent of killing Acheron," I shouted. "Hades deserved to die--Anton was just doing his misguided patriotic duty!"

We had arrived outside the remains of Anton's APC. The guns were firing more sporadically now, picking their targets more carefully; I could hear the sound of small arms as the Russian infantry advanced to retake the lost ground. I released the rear door. It was jammed but it didn't matter; the side door had vanished with the roof and I rapidly packed twenty-two wounded soldiers into an APC designed to carry eight. I closed my eyes and started to cry. It was like seeing a car accident about to happen, the futility of knowing something is about to occur but being unable to do anything about it.

"Hey, Thuzzy!" said Anton in the voice I knew so well. Only he had ever called me that; it was the last word he would speak. I opened my eyes and there he was, as large as life and despite the obvious danger, smiling.

"No!" I shouted, knowing full well what was going to happen next. "Stop! Don't come over here!"

But he did, as he had done all those years before. He stepped out from behind cover and ran across to me. The side of my APC was blown open and I could see him clearly.

"Please no!" I shouted, my eyes full of tears. The memory of that day would fill my mind for years to come. I would immerse myself in work to get away from it.

"Come back for me, Thuz--!"

And then the shell hit him.

He didn't explode; he just sort of vanished in a red mist. I didn't remember driving back and I didn't remember being arrested when I tried to take another APC back into the fray to find him. I had to be forcibly restrained and confined to barracks. I didn't remember anything up until the moment Sergeant Tozer told me to have a shower and clean myself up. I remember treading on the small pieces of sharp bone that washed out of my hair in the shower.

"This is what you try and forget, isn't it?" said Aornis, smiling at me through the steam from the shower as I tugged my fingers through my matted hair, heart thumping, the fear and pain of loss tensing my every muscle and numbing my senses. I tried to grab her by the throat in the shower but my fingers collapsed on nothing and I barked my knuckles on the shower stall. I swore and thumped the wall.

"You all right, Thursday?" said Prudence, a WT operator from Lincoln in the next shower. "They said you went back. Is that true?"

"Yes, it's true," put in Aornis, "and she'll be going back again right now!"

The shower room vanished and we were back on the battlefield, heading towards the wrecked armor amidst the smoke and dust.

"Well!" said Aornis, clapping her hands happily. "We should be able to manage at least eight of these before dawn--don't you just hate reruns?"

I stopped the APC near the smashed tank and the wounded were heaved aboard.

"Hey, Thursday!" said a familiar male voice. I opened one eye and looked across at the soldier with his face bloodied and less than ten seconds of existence remaining on his slate. But it wasn't Anton--it was another officer, the one I had met earlier and with whom I had become involved.

"Thursday!" said Gran in a loud voice. "Thursday, wake up!"

I was back in my bed on the Sunderland, drenched in sweat. I wished it had all just been a bad dream; but it *was* a bad

dream and that was the worst of it.

"Anton's not dead," I gabbled, "he didn't die in the Crimea it was that *other* guy and that's the reason he's not here now because he died and I've been telling myself it was because he was eradicated by the ChronoGuard but he wasn't and--"

"Thursday!" snapped Gran. "Thursday, that is *not* how it happened. Aornis is trying to fool with your mind. Anton died in the charge."

"No, it was the other guy--"

"Landen?"

But the name meant little to me. Gran explained about Aornis and Landen and mnemonomorphs, and although I *understood* what she was saying, I didn't fully believe her. After all, I had seen the Landen fellow die in front of my own eyes, hadn't I?

"Gran, are you having one of your fuzzy moments?"

"No, far from it."

But her voice didn't have the same sort of confidence it usually did. She wrote *Landen* on my hand with a felt pen and I went back to sleep wondering what Anton was up to, and thinking about the short and passionate fling I had enjoyed in the Crimea with that lieutenant, the one who's name I couldn't remember--the one who died in the charge.



## 23.

### Jurisdiction Session No. 40320

Snell was buried in the Text Sea. It was invited guests only, so although Havisham went, I did not. Both Perkins's and Snell's places were to be taken by B-2 Generics who had been playing them for a while in tribute books--the copies you usually find in cheaply printed book-of-the-month choices. As they lowered Snell's body into the sea to be reduced to letters, the Bellman tingled his bell and spoke a short eulogy for both of them. Havisham said it was very moving--but the most ironic part of it was that the entire Perkins & Snell detective series was finally to be offered as a boxed set, and neither of them ever knew.

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*The Jurisdiction Chronicles*

I FELT TIRED AND washed-out the following morning. Gran was still fast asleep, snoring loudly with Pickwick on her lap when I got up. I made a cup of coffee and was sitting at the kitchen table flicking through a copy of *Movable Type* and feeling grotty when there was a gentle rap at the door. I looked up too quickly and my head throbbed.

"Yes?" I called.

"It's Dr. Fnorp. I teach Lola and Randolph."

I opened the door, checked his ID and let him in. A tall man, he seemed quite short and was dark-haired, although on occasion seemed blond. He spoke with a notable accent from nowhere at all, and he had a limp--or perhaps not. He was a Generic's Generic--all things to all people.

"Coffee?"

"Thank you," he said, adding, "Aha!" when he saw the article I had been reading. "Every year there are more categories!"

He was referring to the BookWorld Awards, which had, I noted, been sponsored by Ultra WordTM.

" 'Dopiest Shakespearean Character,' " he read. "Othello should win that one hands down. Are you going to the Bookies?"

"I've been asked to present one. Being the newest Jurisdiction

member affords one that privilege, apparently."

"Oh? It's the first year all the Generics will be going--we've had to give them a day off college."

"What can I do for you?"

"Well, Lola has been late every day this week, constantly talks in class, leads the other girls astray, smokes, swears and was caught operating a distillery in the science block. She has little respect for authority and has slept with most of her male classmates."

"That's terrible! What shall we do?"

"Do?" replied Fnorp. "We aren't going to do anything--Lola has turned out admirably--so much so that we've got her a leading role in *Girls Make All the Moves*, a thirty-something romantic comedy novel. No, I'm really here because I'm worried about Randolph."

"I . . . see. What's the problem?"

"Well, he's just not taking his studies very seriously. He's not stupid; I could make him an A-4 if only he'd pay a little more attention. Those good looks of his are probably his downfall. Aged fifty-something and what we call a 'distinguished gray' archetype, I think he feels he doesn't need any depth--that he can get away with a good descriptive passage at introduction and then do very little."

"And this is a problem because . . . ?"

"I just want something a bit better for him," sighed Dr. Fnorp, who clearly had the best interests of his students at heart. "He's failed his B-grade exams twice; once more and he'll be nothing but an incidental character with a line or two--if he's lucky."

"Perhaps that's what he wants. There isn't enough room for all characters to be A-grade."

"That's what's wrong with the system," said Fnorp bitterly. "If incidental characters had more depth, the whole of fiction would be a lot richer--I want my students to enliven even the C-grade parts."

I got the point. Even from my relative ignorance I could see the importance of fully rounded characters--trouble was, for budgetary reasons, the Council of Genres had pursued a policy of minimum characterization requirements for Generics for

more than thirty years.

"They fear rebellion," he said quietly. "The C of G want Generics to stay stupid; an unsophisticated population is a compliant one--but it's at the cost of the BookWorld."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Well," sighed Fnorp, finishing his coffee, "have a word with Randolph and see what you can do--try to find out why he is being so intransigent."

I told him I would and saw him out the door.

I found Randolph asleep back in his own bed. He was clutching his pillow. Lola had gone out early to meet some friends. A photo of her was on the bedside table next to him and he snored quietly to himself. I crept back to the door and banged on it.

"Wshenifyduh," said a sleepy voice.

"I need to run one of the engines," I told him, "can you give me a hand?"

There was a thump as he fell out of bed. I smiled to myself and took my coffee up to the flight deck.

Mary had told me to run the number three engine periodically and left instructions on how to do so in the form of a checklist. I didn't know how to fly but did know a thing or two about engines--and needed an excuse to talk to Randolph. I sat in the pilot's seat and looked along the wing to the engine. The cowlings were off and the large radial was streaked with oil and grime. It never rained here, which was just as well, although things didn't actually age either, so it didn't matter if it did. I consulted the checklist in front of me. The engine would have to be turned by hand to begin with and I didn't really fancy this, so got a slightly annoyed Randolph out on the wing.

"How many times?" he asked, turning the engine by way of a crank inserted through the cowling.

"Twice should do," I called back, and ten minutes later he returned, hot and sweaty with the exertion.

"What do we do now?" he asked, suddenly a lot more interested. Starting big radial engines was quite a boy thing, after all.

"You read it out," I said, handing him the checklist.

" 'Master fuel on, ignition switches off,' " he read.

"Done."

" 'Prop controls fully up and throttle one inch open.' "

I wrestled with the appropriate levers from a small nest that sprouted from the center console.

"Done. I had Dr. Fnorp round this morning."

" 'Gills set to open and mixture at idle cutoff.' What did that old fart have to say for himself?"

I set the gills and pulled back the mixture lever. "He said he thought you could do a lot better than you had been. What's next?"

" 'Switch on the fuel booster pump until the warning light goes out.' "

"Where do you think that is?"

We found the fuel controls in an awkward position above our heads and to the rear of the flight deck. Randolph switched on the booster pumps.

"I don't want to be a featured character," he said. "I'll be quite happy working as a mature elder-male mentor figure or something; there is call for one in *Girls Make All the Moves*."

"Isn't that the novel Lola will be working in?"

"Is it?" he said, feigning ignorance badly. "I had no idea."

"Okay," I said as the fuel pressure warning light went out, "now what?"

" 'Set the selector switch to the required engine and operate the priming pump until the delivery pipes are full.' "

I pumped slowly, the faint smell of aviation spirit filling the air.

"What's this love/hate thing between you and Lola?"

"Oh, that's all well over," he said dismissively. "She's seeing some guy over at the Heroes Advanced Classes."

I stopped pumping as the handle met with some resistance. "We have fuel pressure. What's next?"

" 'Ignition and booster coil both on.' "

"Check."

" 'Press starter and when engine is turning, operate the primer.' Does that make sense?"

"Let's see."

I pressed the starter button and the prop slowly started to move. Randolph pumped the primer, and there was a cough as the engine fired; then another, this time accompanied by a large puff of black smoke from the exhaust. A few waders who were poking around in the shallows took flight as the engine appeared to die, then caught again and started to fire more regularly, the loud detonations transmitting through the airframe as a series of rumbles, growls and squeaks. I released the start button and Randolph stopped priming. The engine smoothed out, I switched to *Auto-Rich* and the oil pressure started to rise. I throttled back and smiled at Randolph, who grinned at me.

"Are you seeing anyone?" I asked him.

"No."

He looked at me with his large eyes. When we had first met, he had been an empty husk, a blank face with no personality or features to call his own. Now he was a man of fifty but with the emotional insecurity of a fifteen-year-old.

"I can't imagine life without her, Thursday!" he suddenly burst out. "I think about her every second of every minute of every day!"

"So tell her."

"And make myself look an idiot? She'd tell everyone at Tabularasa's--I'd be the laughingstock of them all!"

"Who cares? Dr. Fnorp tells me it's affecting your work; do you want to end up as a walk-on part somewhere?"

"I really don't care," he said sadly. "Without Lola there *isn't* much of a future."

"There'll be other Generics!"

"Not like her. Always laughing and joking. When she's around, the sun shines and the birds sing." He stopped and coughed, embarrassed at his admission. "You won't tell anyone I said all that stuff, will you?"

He was smitten good and proper.

"Randolph," I said slowly, "you have to tell her your feelings, even for your own sake. This will prey on your mind for years!"

"What if she laughs at me?"

"What if she doesn't? There's a good chance she actually

quite likes you!"

Randolph's shoulders slumped. "I'll speak to her as soon as she gets back."

"Good." I looked at my watch. "I've got roll call in twenty minutes. Let the engine run for ten minutes and then shut her down. I'll see you tonight."

"Who are we waiting for?" asked the Bellman.

"Godot," replied Benedict.

"Absent *again*. Anybody know where he is?"

There was a mass shaking of heads.

The Bellman made a note in his book, tingled his bell and cleared his throat.

"Jurisdiction session number 40320 is now in session," he said in a voice tinged with emotion.

"Item one. Perkins and Snell. Fine operatives who made the ultimate sacrifice for duty. Their names will be carved into the Boojumorial to live forever as inspiration for those who come after us. I call now for two minutes silence. Perkins and Snell!"

"Perkins and Snell," we all repeated, and stood in silent memory of those lost.

"Thank you," said the Bellman after two minutes had ticked by. "Commander Bradshaw will be taking over the bestiary. Mathias's mare has been contacted and asked me to say thank you to all those who sent tributes. The Perkins and Snell detective series will be taken over by B-2 clones from the tribute book, and I know you will join me in wishing them the very best on their new venture."

He paused and took a deep breath.

"These losses are a great shock to us all, and the lessons to be learned must not be ignored. We can *never* be too careful. Okay, item two.

He turned over a page on his clipboard.

"Investigation of Perkins's death. Commander Bradshaw, doesn't this come under your remit?"

"Investigations are proceeding," replied Bradshaw slowly. "There is no reason to suppose that their deaths were anything other than an accident."

"So what stops you closing the case?"

"Because," replied Bradshaw, trying to think up an excuse quickly, "because, um, we still want to speak to Vernham Deane."

"Deane is somehow involved?" asked the Bellman.

"Yes--perhaps."

"Interesting turn of events," said the Bellman, "which brings us neatly on to item three. I'm sorry to announce that Vernham Deane has been placed on the PageRunner's list."

There was a sharp intake of breath. Classed as a PageRunner meant only one thing: illegal activities.

"We've known Vern since he was written, guys, and hard as it might be, we think he's done something pretty bad. Tweed, haven't you got something to say about this?"

Harris Tweed stood up and cleared his throat. "Vernham Deane is familiar to all of us. As the resident cad in *The Squire of High Potternews*, he was well-known for his cruelty towards the maidservant, who he ravages and then casts from the house. The maid returns ten chapters later, but three days ago--the morning following Perkins's death, I might add--she didn't."

He placed a picture of an attractive dark-haired woman on the board.

"She's a C-3 Generic by the name of Mimi. Twenty years old, identification code CDT/2511922."

"What did Deane say about her disappearance?"

"That's just it," replied Tweed grimly, "he vanished at the same time. *The Squire of High Potternews* has been suspended pending further inquiries. It's been removed to the Well and will stay there until Deane returns. *If* he returns."

"Aren't you leaping to conclusions just a little bit early?" asked Havisham, obviously concerned by the lack of objectivity in Tweed's report. "Do we even have a motive?"

"We all liked Vern," said Tweed, "me included. Despite being a villain in *Potternews*, he never gave us any cause for alarm. I was surprised by what I found, and you might be, too."

He pulled a piece of paper from his top pocket and unfolded it.

"This is a copy of a refusal by the Council of Genres narrative realignment subcommittee to agree to Deane's

application for an Internal Plot Adjustment."

He pinned it on the board next to the picture of the maidservant.

"In it he requests for the maidservant to die in childbirth, thus saving his character from the traumatic scene at the end of chapter twenty-eight when the maidservant turns up with the infant, now aged six, to his wedding to Ellen O'Shaugnessy, the wealthy mill owner's daughter. With the maidservant out of the way he can marry O'Shaugnessy and not suffer the degrading slide into alcoholism and death that awaits him in chapter thirty-two. I'm sorry to say that he had motive, Miss Havisham. He also had the opportunity--and the Jurisfiction skills to cover his tracks."

There was silence as everyone took in the awful possibility of a Jurisfiction agent gone bad. The only time it had happened before was when David Copperfield murdered Dora Spenlow so he could marry Agnes Wickfield.

"Did you search his book?" asked Falstaff.

"Yes. We subjected *The Squire of High Potternews* to a word-by-word search and we only found one person who was not meant to be there--a stowaway from Farquitt's previous book, *Canon of Love*, hiding in a cupboard in Potternews Hall. She was evicted back to her book."

"Have you tried the bookhounds?" inquired the Red Queen, running a cleaner through the barrel of her pistol. "Once they get onto a scent, there's no stopping them."

"We lost them at the fence-painting sequence in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*."

"Tell them about the Perkins connection, Harris."

"I think that is assumption, Bellman, if you please," answered Tweed.

"Tell them," repeated the Bellman, his shoulders sagging. "I think everyone needs to know the full facts if we are to hunt Deane down."

"Very well." Tweed upended a box and deposited a huge quantity of full stops, commas and semicolons onto the table.

"We found these hidden at the back of Deane's locker. We had them analyzed and found traces of Guinness."

"*Ulysses!*" gasped Benedict.



"So it would appear," replied Tweed gravely. "Perkins mentioned something about a *surprising discovery* in a report filed the day before he died. We're working on the theory that Deane was involved in stealing or handling stolen punctuation. Perkins finds out, so Deane releases the Minotaur and vyirus to cover his tracks. Flushed with success and knowing he will have to vanish, he kills the maidservant, something he has been wanting to do since first publication."

"Isn't Perkins my investigation?" asked Bradshaw.

"My apologies," replied Tweed, "I will give you a full copy of my report."

He stopped and sat down.

"I hate to say this," began the Bellman sadly, "but it seems as though we have underestimated Deane. Until I am shown otherwise, I have no choice but to declare him a PageRunner. He is to be arrested on sight--and exercise extreme caution. If he has killed twice, he will not hesitate to kill again."

We exchanged anxious glances. Being declared a PageRunner was serious--few were captured alive.

"Item four," continued the Bellman. "The Minotaur. We've got an APB out on him at present, but until he turns up or does something stupid, we won't know where he is. There was a report he had crossed over into nonfiction, which I would love to believe. Until we know otherwise, everyone should keep a good lookout."

He consulted his clipboard again.

"Item five. The 923rd Annual BookWorld Awards. Because we are launching UltraWord™ at the same time, all serving members of the BookWorld have been invited. Obviously we can't leave books unmanned, so skeleton staff will be left in charge. The venue will be the Starlight Room again, although with a displacement field technology we've borrowed from the SF boys so everyone can attend. This will mean extra security and I have allocated Falstaff to look after it. Any questions?"

There weren't, so he moved on.

"Item six. Thursday Next has been made a probationary Jurisdiction member. Where are you?"

I put up my hand.

"Good. Let me be the first to welcome you to the service--

and not before time; we need all the extra hands we can get. Ladies and gentlemen, Thursday Next!"

I smiled modestly as there was a round of applause; the people nearest me patted me on the arm.

"Well done!" said Tweed, who was close by, grinning.

"Miss Next will be afforded full rights and privileges, although she will remain under Miss Havisham's watchful eye for twenty chapters or a year, whichever be the longer. Will you take her up to the Council of Genres and have her sworn in?"

"Happily," replied Miss Havisham.

"Good. Item seven. The *had had* and *that that* problem. Lady Cavendish, weren't you working on this?"

Lady Cavendish stood up and gathered her thoughts. "Indeed. The uses of *had had* and *that that* have to be strictly controlled; they can interrupt the imaginotransference quite dramatically, causing readers to go back over the sentence in confusion, something we try to avoid."

"Go on."

"It's mostly an unlicensed-usage problem. At the last count *David Copperfield* alone had had *had had* sixty-three times, all but ten unapproved. *Pilgrim's Progress* may also be a problem due to its *had had/that that* ratio."

"So what's the problem in *Progress*?"

"That that had *that that* ten times but had had *had had* only thrice. Increased *had had* usage had had to be overlooked, but not if the number exceeds that *that that* usage."

"Hmm," said the Bellman, "I thought *had had* had had TGC's approval for use in Dickens? What's the problem?"

"Take the first *had had* and *that that* in the book by way of example," explained Lady Cavendish. "You would have thought that that first *had had* had had good occasion to be seen as *had*, had you not? *Had* had had approval but *had had* had not; equally it is true to say that that *that that* had had approval but that that other *that that* had not."

"So the problem with that other *that that* was that . . . ?"

"That that other-other *that that* had had approval."

"Okay," said the Bellman, whose head was in danger of falling apart like a chocolate orange, "let me get this straight:

*David Copperfield*, unlike *Pilgrim's Progress*, had had *had*, had had *had had*. *Had had* had had TGC's approval?"

There was a very long pause.

"Right," said the Bellman with a sigh, "that's it for the moment. I'll be giving out assignments in ten minutes. Session's over--and let's be careful out there."

"Never would have thought it of Vernham, by George!" exclaimed Bradshaw as he walked up. "He was like a son to me!"

"I didn't know you had a son."

"I don't. But if I did, he would be just like Vern."

"His character in *Potternews* wasn't that pleasant," I observed.

"We usually try and keep our book personalities separate from our Jurisfiction ones," said Havisham. "Think yourself lucky I don't carry over any of my personality from *Great Expectations*--if I did, I'd be pretty intolerable!"

"Yes," I said diplomatically, "I'm very grateful for it."

"Ah!" said the Bellman as he joined us. "Miss Havisham. You're to go and swear in Agent Next at the C of G, then get yourself to the Well and see if you can find any clues inside *The Squire of High Potternews*. If possible, I want him alive. But--take no risks."

"Understood," replied Miss Havisham.

"Good!" The Bellman clapped his hands together and departed to talk to the Red Queen.

Havisham beckoned me over to her desk and indicated for me to sit.

"Firstly, congratulations on becoming a full Jurisfiction agent."

"I'm not ready for this!" I hissed. "I'm probably going to fall flat on my face!"

"*Probably* has nothing to do with it; you shall. Failure concentrates the mind wonderfully. If you don't make mistakes, you're not trying hard enough."

I started to thank her for her faint praise, but she interrupted, "This is for you."

From the bottom drawer of her desk she had withdrawn a small, green leather box of the sort that might contain a

wedding ring. She passed it over and I opened it. As I did, I felt a flash of inspiration move through me. I knew what it was. No bigger than a grain of rice, it had value far in excess of its size.

"From the Last Original Idea," murmured Havisham, "a small shard from when the whole was cleaved in 1884, but a part nonetheless. Use it wisely."

"I can't accept this," I said, shutting the case.

"Rubbish. Accept with good grace that which is given with good grace."

"Thank you very much, Miss Havisham."

"Don't mention it. Why do you have *Landen* written on your hand?"

I looked at my hand but had no idea why. Gran had put it there--she must have been having one of her fuzzy moments.

"I'm not sure, Miss Havisham."

"Then wash it off--it looks so vulgar. Come, let us adjourn to the Council of Genres--you are to sign the pledge!"

## Pledges, the Council of Genres and Searching for Deane

**Bookhound/Booktracker:** Name given to a breed of bloodhound peculiar to the Well. With a keen sense of smell and boundless energy, a bookhound can track a PageRunner not only from page to page but from book to book. The finest bookhounds, diligently trained, have also been known to track transgenre PageRunners and, on occasion, to the Outland. They drool and slobber a lot. Not recommended as pets.

CAT FORMERLY KNOWN AS CHESHIRE,  
*Guide to the Great Library*

WE TOOK THE elevator. Miss Havisham told me that it was considered the height of poor breeding and vulgarity to jump all the way to the lobby at the Council of Genres--and it was impossible to jump straight into the Council chambers for security purposes. The chambers were situated on the twenty-sixth floor of the Great Library. Like the seventeenth floor it was almost deserted; authors whose names begin with Q and Z are not that abundant. The doors opened and we stepped out. But it wasn't like the previous library floors I had visited, all somber dark wood, molded plaster ceilings and busts of long-dead writers--the twenty-sixth floor had a glazed roof. Curved spans of wrought iron arched high above our heads supporting the glass, through which we could see clouds and a blue sky beyond. I had always thought that the library was created *conceptually* to contain the books and had no use or existence outside that. Miss Havisham noticed me staring up at the sky and drew me towards a large window. Although it was the twenty-sixth floor, it seemed a lot higher--and the library, inwardly shaped like a fine cross many miles in length, was far squatter when seen from the outside. I looked down the rain-streaked exterior and beyond the stone gargoyles to a tropical forest far below us, where wispy clouds flecked the tops of the lush foliage.

"Anything is possible in the BookWorld," murmured Miss

Havisham. "The only barriers are those of the human imagination. See the other libraries?"

Not more than five miles distant, just visible in the aerial haze, was another tower like ours, and beyond that, another--and over to my right, six more. We were just one towering library of hundreds--or perhaps thousands.

"The nearest one to us is German," said Miss Havisham, "beyond that French and Spanish. Arabic is just beyond them--and that one over there is Welsh."

"What are they standing on?" I asked, looking at the jungle far below. "Where *exactly* are we?"

"Getting all philosophical, are we?" murmured Miss Havisham. "The long and short answer is we really don't know. Some people claim we are just part of a bigger story that we can't see. Others maintain that we were created by the Great Panjandrum, and still others that we are merely in the *mind* of the Great Panjandrum."

"Who," I asked, my curiosity finally getting the better of me, "is the Great Panjandrum?"

"Come and see the statue."

We turned from the window and walked along the corridor to where a large lump of marble rested on a plinth in the middle of the lobby. The marble was roped off, and below it was a large and highly polished plaque proclaiming *Our Glorious Leader*.

"That's the Great Panjandrum?" I asked, looking at the crude block of stone.

"No, that's only the statue of the Great P--or at least it will be when we figure out what he or she looks like. Good afternoon, Mr. Price."

Mr. Price was a stonemason but he wasn't doing anything; in fact, I don't think he had *ever* done anything--his tools were brightly polished, unmarked, and lying in a neat row next to where he was sitting, reading a copy of *The Word*.

"Good afternoon, Miss Havisham," he said, politely raising his hat.

Havisham indicated the surroundings. "The Great Panjandrum is meant to be the architect of all this and controls everything we do. I'm a little skeptical myself; no one

controls *my* movements."

"They wouldn't dare," I whispered.

"What did you say?"

"I said, *they couldn't care*. Not a great deal, given the violence in books."

She looked at me and raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps. Come along and see the Council at work."

She steered me down the corridor to a door that opened into a viewing gallery above the vast Council chamber with desks arranged in concentric circles.

"The main genres are seated at the front," whispered Miss Havisham. "The subgenres are seated behind and make up a voting group that can be carried forward to the elected head of each genre, although they do have a veto. Behind the subgenres are elected representatives from the Congress of Derivatives, who bring information forward to the subgenres inspectorate--and behind them are the subcommittees who decide on day-to-day issues such as the Book Inspectorate, new words, letter supply and licensing the reworkings of old ideas. The Book Inspectorate also license plot devices, Jurisfiction agents and the supply and training schedules for Generics."

"Who's that talking now?" I asked.

"The Thriller delegate. She's arguing against Detective having a genre all of its own--at present Detective is under Crime, but if they break away, the genres at Thriller will want to split themselves three ways into Adventure, Spy and Thriller."

"Is it always this boring?" I asked, watching the Thriller delegate drone on.

"Always. We try to avoid any entanglements and let Text Grand Central take all the flak. This way."

We left the viewing gallery and padded down the corridor to a door that led into the smallest room I had ever seen. It seemed to be mostly filing cabinet and desk. An equally small man was eating biscuits--and most of them were falling down his front.

"Thursday Next to take the pledge," announced Miss Havisham. "I have the documents all signed and sealed by the

Bellman."

"Work, work, work," said the small man, taking a swig of tea and looking up at me with small yet oddly intense eyes. "I rarely get any peace--you're the second pledge this year." He sighed and wiped his mouth on his tie. "Who seconds the application?"

"Commander Bradshaw."

"And who vouches for Miss Next?"

"I do."

"Good. Stand up and repeat the oath of the BookWorld."

I stood up and, primed by Miss Havisham, repeated:

"I swear by the Great Panjandrum that I shall uphold the rules of Jurisfiction, protect the BookWorld and defend every fictioneer, no matter how poorly written, against oppression. I shall not shirk from my duty, nor use my knowledge or position for personal gain. Secrets entrusted to me by the Council of Genres or Text Grand Central must remain secret within the service, and I will do all I can to maintain the power of storytelling within the minds and hearts of the readers."

"That'll do," said the small man, after another bite of his biscuit. "Sign here, here, and, er, *here*. And you have to witness it, Miss Havisham."

I signed where he indicated in the large ledger, noting as I did so that the last Jurisfiction agent to have signed was Beatrice. He snapped the book shut after Miss Havisham had witnessed my signature.

"Good. Here's your badge."

He handed over a shiny Jurisfiction badge with my name and number engraved below the colorful logo. It could get me into any book I wanted without question--even Poe if I so chose, although it wasn't recommended.

"Now if you'll excuse me," said the bureaucrat, looking at his watch, "I'm very busy. These forms have to be processed in under a month."

We returned to the elevator and Miss Havisham pressed the twenty-sixth subbasement button. We were going back into the Well.



"Good," she said, "now that's out of the way we can get on. Perkins and Mathias we can safely say were murdered; Snell might as well have been. We are still waiting for Godot and someone tried to kill you with an exploding hat. As an apprentice you have limited powers; as a full member of Jurisdiction you can do a lot more. You must be on your guard!"

"But why?"

"Because I don't want you dead, and if you know what's good for you, neither do you."

"No, I mean why is someone trying to kill me?"

"I wish I knew."

"Let's suppose," I said, "that Deane isn't just missing--that he might have been murdered. Is there a link between Perkins, Deane, Mathias, and myself?"

"None that I can think of," said Miss Havisham after a great deal of thought, "but if we consider that Mathias might have been killed because he was a witness, and that one of your Outlander friends might be trying to kill *you*, then that narrows the list to Perkins and Deane. And there *is* a link between those two."

"Yes?"

"Harris Tweed, myself, Perkins and Deane were all given an Ultra Word™ book to test."

"I didn't know this."

"No one did. I can only tell you now because you are a full agent--didn't you hear what was in the pledge?"

"I see," I said slowly. "What's Ultra Word™ like?"

"As Libris states: 'the ultimate reading experience.' The first thing that hits you is the music and color."

"What about the new plots?"

"I didn't see that," confessed Miss Havisham as the elevator doors opened. "We were all given a copy of *The Little Prince* updated with the new operating system--but PageGlow™, WordBuddy™, PlotPotPlus™ and ReadZip™ are all quite dazzling in their simplicity."

"That's good."

"But something just doesn't seem right."

"That's not so good."

The doors of the elevator opened and we walked along the corridor to where the Text Sea opened out in front of us, the roof of the corridor lifting higher and higher until it had no discernible end, just swirling patterns of punctuation forming into angry storm clouds. Scrawltrawlers rode gently at their moorings at the dockside while the day's wordcatch was auctioned off.

"Like what? A problem with the system?"

"I wish I knew," said Miss Havisham, "but try as I might I couldn't make the book do anything it shouldn't. In BOOK V7.2 you could force an uncommanded translation into Esperanto by subjecting the book to a high-g maneuver. In BOOK V6.3 the verb *to eat* conflicted with any description of a pangolin and caused utter mayhem with the tenses. I've tried everything to get Ultra WordTM to fail, but it's steady as a rock."

We walked beyond the harbor to where large pipes spewed jumbled letters back into the Text Sea amidst a strong smell of rubber.<sup>1</sup>

"This is where the words end up when you erase them in the Outland," mentioned Miss Havisham as we strolled past. "Anything the matter?"

"Junkfootnoterphones again," I muttered, trying to screen the rubbish out, "a scam of some sort, I think. What makes you believe anything *is* the trouble with Ultra WordTM?"

"Well," said Havisham slowly, "Perkins called me the night before he died. He said he had a surprising discovery but didn't want to talk over the footnoterphone."

"Was it about Ultra WordTM?"

Havisham shrugged. "To be truthful, I don't know. It's possible--but it could have been about Deane just as easily."

The road petered out into a beach formed by shards of broken letters. This was where novels met their end. Beneath the leaden skies the books--here taking the appearance of seven-story buildings--were cast high upon the shore, any plot devices and settings of any use torn out to be sold as salvage. The remaining hulks were then pulled to pieces by Generics working in teams with nothing more high-tech than crowbars, cutting torches and chains, stripping the old novels back into

words, which were tipped into the sea by wheelbarrow gangs, the words dissolving back into letters, their meaning burning off into a slight bluish haze that collected at the foreshore.

We arrived at the copy of *The Squire of High Potternews*. It looked dark and somber here on the shore of the Text Sea. Anyone trying to find a copy in the Outland would have a great deal of trouble; when Text Grand Central withdraw a book, they really mean it.

The book was resting on its end and was slightly open. A large tape had been run round the outside that read *Jurisdiction, Do Not Cross*.

"Looking for something?"

It was Harris Tweed and Uriah Hope; they jumped down from the book and looked at us curiously.

"Good evening, Harris," said Miss Havisham. "We were trying to find Deane."

"Me, too. Have a look around if you wish, but I'm damned if I can find a single clue as to his whereabouts."

"Has anyone tried to kill you recently?" I asked.

"Me?" replied Harris. "No. Why, should they?"

I told him about the Ultra Word™ connection.

"It's possible that there might be a link," he mused, "but I gave UltraWord™ the fullest test; it seemed to work extremely well no matter *what* I did! Do you have any idea what Perkins had discovered?"

"We don't know he found anything wrong at all," said Havisham.

Harris thought for a moment. "I think we should definitely keep this to ourselves," he said at last, "and take great care what we do. If Deane is about and had anything to do with Perkins's death, he might be after you or I next."

Havisham agreed, told me to go see Professor Plum to see if he could shed any more light on the failed Eject-O-Hat and vanished after telling me she had an urgent appointment to keep.

When she had gone, Harris said to me, "Keep an eye on the old girl, won't you?"

I promised I would and made my way back towards the elevators, deep in thought.

## 25.

### Havisham--the Final Bow

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*Macbeth for Yeast*, translated by . .////. .////. .

**AH!"** SAID PLUM as I walked into his office. "Miss Next--good news and bad news."

"Better give me the bad news first."

Plum took off his spectacles and polished them.

"The Eject-O-Hat. I've pulled the records and traced the manufacturing process all the way back to the original milliner; it seems that over a hundred people have been involved in it's manufacture, modification and overhaul schedules. Fifteen years is a long service life for an Eject-O-Hat. Add the people with the know-how and we've got a shortlist of about six hundred."

"A broad net."

"I'm afraid so."

I went to the window and looked out. Two peacocks were strutting across the lawn.

"What was the good news?"

"You know Miss Scarlett at records?"

"Yes?"

"We're getting married on Tuesday."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you. Was there anything else?"

"I don't think so," I replied, walking to the door. "Thanks for your help."

"My pleasure!" he replied kindly. "Tell Miss Havisham she should get a new Eject-O-Hat--this one is quite beyond repair."

"It wasn't Havisham's, it was mine."

He raised his eyebrows. "You're mistaken," he said after a pause. "Look."

He pulled the battered homburg from his desk and showed me Havisham's name etched on the sweatband with a number, manufacturing details and size.

"But," I said slowly, "I was wearing this hat in--"

The awful truth dawned. There must have been a mix-up with the hats. They hadn't been trying to kill me that day--*they had been after Miss Havisham!*

"Problems?" said Plum.

"Of the worst sort," I muttered. "Can I use your footnoterphone?"

I didn't wait for a reply; I picked up the brass horn and asked for Miss Havisham. She wasn't in the Well, nor *Great Expectations*. I replaced the speaking horn and jumped to the lobby of the Great Library, where the general stores were situated; if anyone knew what Havisham was up to, it would be Wemmick.

Mr. Wemmick wasn't busy; he was reading a newspaper with his feet on the counter.

"Miss Next!" he said happily, getting up to shake my hand warmly. "What can I do for you?"

"Miss Havisham," I blurted out, "do you know where she is?"

Wemmick squirmed inwardly. "I'm not sure she'd like me to tell--"

"Wemmick!" I cried. "Someone tried to kill Miss Havisham and they may try again!"

He looked shocked and bit his lip. "I don't know *where* she is," he said slowly, "but I know what she's doing."

My heart sank. "It's another land speed attempt, isn't it?"

He nodded miserably.

"Where?"

"I don't know. She said the Higham wasn't powerful enough. She signed out the Bluebird, a twin-engined, twenty-five-hundred horsepower brute of a car--it almost didn't fit in the storeroom."

"Do you have any idea where she's going to drive it?"

"None at all."

"Damn!" I yelled, slamming my hand against the counter. "Think, Thursday, think!"

I had an idea. I grasped the footnoterphone and asked to be put through to Mr. Toad from *Wind in the Willows*. He wasn't in but Ratty was; and after I had explained who I was and what I wanted, he gave me the information I needed. Havisham and Mr. Toad were racing on Pendine sands, in the Socialist Republic of Wales.

I ran up the stairs and to the works of Dylan Thomas, picked up a slim volume of poetry and concentrated on my exit point in the Outland. To my delight it worked and I was catapulted out of fiction and into an untidy heap in a small bookshop in Laugharne, Thomas's old village in the south of Wales. Now a shrine for Welsh and non-Welsh visitors alike, the bookshop was one of eight in the village selling nothing but Welsh literature and Thomas memorabilia.

There was a scream from a startled book buyer as I appeared, and I stepped backwards in alarm only to fall over a pile of Welsh cookery books. I got up and ran from the shop as a car screeched to a halt in front of me. Pendine sands with its ten miles of flat beach was down the coast from Laugharne and I would need transport to get me there.

I showed the driver my Jurisdiction badge, which *looked* official even if it meant nothing, and said, in my very best Welsh, "Esgipysgod fi ond ble mae bws i Pendine?"

She got the message and drove me along the road towards Pendine. Before we arrived I could see the Bluebird on the sands, together with Mr. Toad's car and a small group of people. The tide was out and a broad expanse of inviting smooth sand greeted Miss Havisham. As I watched, my pulse racing, two plumes of black smoke erupted from the back of the record-breaker as the engines fired up. Even through the window I could hear the guttural cry of the engines.

"Dewch ymlaen!" I urged the driver, and we swerved onto the car park just near the statue of John Parry Thomas. I ran down onto the beach, arms waving and yelling, but no one heard me above the roar of the engines, and even if they had, there was little reason for them to take any notice.

"Hi!" I shouted. "Miss Havisham!"

I ran as fast as I could but only exhausted myself so that I ran slower with every passing step.

"Stop!" I yelled, getting weaker and breathless. "For pity's sake--!"

But it was too late. With another deep growl the car moved off and started to gather speed across the sand. I stopped and dropped to my knees, trying to gulp deep lungfuls of air, my heart racing. The car hurtled away from me, the engine roar fading as she tore along the hard sand. I watched it go at medium speed to the far end of the beach, then turn in a large arc for the first of her two runs. The engine growled again, rising to a high scream as the car gathered speed, the driving wheels throwing a shower of sand and pebbles far behind it. I willed her to be safe and for nothing to happen, and indeed, nothing did until she was decelerating after the first run. I was breathing a sigh of relief when one of the front wheels broke loose and was dragged beneath the car, throwing it up into the air. The front edge of the bodywork dug into the sand and the car swerved violently sideways. I heard a cry of fear from the small crowd and a series of sickening thuds as the car rolled end over end down the beach, the engine screaming out of control as the wheels gripped nothing but air. It came to rest right way up not five hundred yards from me, and I ran towards it. I was three hundred yards away when the petrol tank ignited in a mushroom of fire that lifted the three-ton car from the sand. When I got there, I jumped onto the front of the car and pulled Miss Havisham from the burning wreck, dragged her clear and rolled her on the sand to extinguish the flames.

"Water!" I cried. "Water for her burns!"

The small crowd of onlookers were hopeless and could do nothing but stare at us in shock as I used my pocketknife to cut away the burnt remnants of her wedding veil. I winced as I worked--she was horribly burned.

"Thursday?" she murmured, although she couldn't see me. "Please--please take me home."

I'd never jumped dual, taking someone with me, but I did it now. I jumped clean out of Pendine and into *Great*

*Expectations*, right into Miss Havisham's room at Satis House, next to the rotting wedding party that never was, the darkened room, the clocks stopped at twenty to nine. It was the place where I had first seen her all those weeks ago, and it would be the place I saw her last. I laid her on the bed and tried to make her comfortable.

"Cat!"<sup>1</sup>

"There's been a code-12. Fictional vehicle left on Pendine sands in the Outland. I need a fixed perimeter and a cleanup gang ASAP!"<sup>2</sup>

"Not good, Chesh. I'll get back to you."<sup>3</sup>

"Dear Thursday," said Miss Havisham, clasping my hand in hers, "was it an accident?"

"I don't know, Miss Havisham. But the Eject-O-Hat was not mine--it was intended for you."

She sighed. "Then, then . . . they got to me."

"Who?"

"I don't know. This is the BookWorld so it's got to be someone close and whom we don't suspect. Someone we thought was a friend."

"Bradshaw?"

She shook her head and started to cough. For a moment, I didn't think she would stop. The Jurisfiction medic jumped into the darkened room, followed by several nurses, who pushed me out of the way as they tried to cool and dress her wounds. But I couldn't get away. Havisham still had hold of my hand and pulled me closer.

"I will not come through this," she whispered.

"You'll be fine! In *Great Expectations* you survive until the end--can't let Dickens or the readers down, hey?"

"Then it looks like we will both be guilty of a Fiction Infraction, my dear."

She tried to smile but couldn't make her swollen features do as she bid.

"I have enough strength to make a good exit. I will make my peace with Pip and Estella--a far better ending for me, I think."

"Miss Havisham!" I pleaded. "Please don't talk this way!"

"You are close to me, my dear," she hissed, "they will come for you next!"



"But why?"

"The formulaic, Thursday. It is our enemy. Uphold fiction's independence, beware of Big Martin and shun the frumious bandersnatch . . ."

"She's becoming delirious," said the medic as I felt her clasp loosen from mine, and with it, I felt my eyes start to stream. More medics arrived and I moved towards the back of the room where Pip, Estella, and Mr. Pumblechook had all arrived to look on helplessly as the medics attempted to save her life.

"You did what you could," said Pip slowly, "and we are very grateful to you."

"It wasn't enough," I said quietly, "but she wants to improvise a new ending with you."

"Then I will stay here," said Pip softly, "until she regains consciousness."

We waited there, Pip and I, until Miss Havisham was well enough to make her final appearance in *Great Expectations*. She had bade farewell to the Bellman and Bradshaw. The Council of Genres had even interrupted their busy schedule to rubber-stamp an Internal Plot Adjustment to allow her to improvise her own fiery ending. An A-2 generic was being trained to take her place even as we were saying our good-byes. She took my arm even though she couldn't see me and pressed the Ultra Word™ copy of *The Little Prince* into my hand.

"The formulaic," she said again, "is our one true enemy. Defend the BookWorld against it, promise me?"

"I promise."

"You know, Thursday, you're going to be pretty good at all this."

I thanked her.

"One more thing."

I leaned closer.

"Don't tell anyone I said this, but I don't think men are *quite* so bad as I make out."

I smiled. "You might be right."

She coughed again and signaled for me to leave. I had many questions I needed to ask, but she didn't have long and we

both knew it. I nodded to Pip as we passed each other at the door, and I gently closed it behind me. I waited outside with a heavy heart and tensed as I heard a shriek and a flickering orange light shone beneath the door. I heard Pip curse, then more thumps and shouts as he smothered the fire with his cape. Jaw clenched, I turned away, my heart heavy with loss. She had been bossy and obnoxious, but she had protected me, rescued me and taught me well. I have yet to meet a more extraordinary woman, either real or imagined, and she would always have a place in my heart.

## 26.

### Post-Havisham Blues

The Bellman lived in a grace-and-favor apartment at Norland Park when he wasn't working in *The Hunting of the Snark*. He had been head of Jurisfiction for twenty years and was required, under Council of Genres mandate, to stand down. The Bellman, oddly enough, had always been called the Bellman--it was no more than coincidence that he had actually been a Bellman himself. The previous Bellman had been Bradshaw, and before him, Virginia Woolf. Under Woolf, Jurisfiction roll calls tended to last several hours.

THE BELLMAN,  
*Hardest Job in Fiction*

I WALKED INTO THE Jurisfiction offices an hour later. The Bellman, Bradshaw and Harris Tweed were staring at two pieces of broken and scorched metal lying on a desk.

"I can't say how sorry we all are," said the Bellman, "we all thought the world of her. Did she tell you about the time the Martians escaped and tried to force the Council of Genres into ordering a sequel--one where they were triumphant?"

"No," I said quietly, "she rarely talked about her past work. What's this?" I pointed at the broken pieces of metal.

"It's the stub axle from the Bluebird. It looks as though it failed through metal fatigue."

"An accident?"

The Bellman nodded his head. They hadn't got to her after all. Earlier, Bradshaw had shown me the UltraWord™ reports written by Perkins, Deane and Miss Havisham. They'd all given it the thumbs-up. If Perkins was murdered, it wasn't over Ultra Word™. Despite all that had happened, I still only had a doctored Eject-O-Hat to point to anything suspicious about Havisham's death, and only a misplaced key for Perkins's. Motor racing has its own share of dangers, and Havisham knew it.

"You're off the active list for a few days, Miss Next," said the Bellman. "Take it easy at home and come back in when you're ready."

Tweed said, "She was one of the best."

"One in a million," added Bradshaw, "won't see the likes of her again, I'll be bound."

"We want to offer you a permanent job," said the Bellman. "A modern system like Ultra Word™ needs people like you to police it. I want you to consider a post here within Fiction. Good retirement plan and plenty of perks."

I looked up at him. This seemed to me like rather a good idea. After all, there was no one waiting for me back at Swindon. What did I need the real world for?

"Sounds good, Mr. Bellman. Can I sleep on it?"

He smiled. "Take as long as you want."

I got back to Mary's flying boat and sat on the jetty until the sun had gone down, mulling over everything that Miss Havisham and I had done together. When it grew chilly, I moved myself indoors and read over what Miss Havisham had done with her final scene. A professional to the last, she had enacted her own death with a sensitivity I had never seen her exhibit in life. I found a bottle of wine, poured myself a large glass and drank it gratefully. Oddly, I thought there was a reason perhaps I *shouldn't* be drinking, but couldn't think what it was. I looked at my hand where there had been a name written that morning. Havisham had instructed me to scrub it out, and I had--but even so I was intrigued and tried to figure out from the small marks visible what had been written there.

"Lisbon," I muttered. "Why would I write *Lisbon* on my hand?"

I shrugged. The delicate red was a welcome friend and I poured another glass. I found the copy of *The Little Prince* that Havisham had given me and opened the cover. The paper felt like a sort of thin plastic, the letters a harsh black against the milky white pages. The text glowed in the dim light of the kitchen, and intrigued, I took the book into the darkness of the utility cupboard where I could still read it as clear as day. I returned to my place at the table and tried the "read sensitive" preferences page, the words changing from red to blue as I read them, then back again as I reread them. In this manner I turned the PageGlow™ feature on and off, and then I played

with the levels of the background and music tracks.

I started to read the book, and as the first words entered my head, a huge panoply of new emotions opened up. As I read the sequence in the desert, I could hear the sound of the wind on the dunes and even feel the heat and taste the scorched sands. The voice of the narrator was different to that of the Prince, and no dialogue tags were needed to differentiate them. It was, as Libris had asserted, an extraordinary piece of technology. I shut the book, leaned back on my chair and closed my eyes.

There was a tap at the door.

"Hullo!" Arnold said. "Can I come in?"

"Make yourself at home. Drink?"

"Thank you."

He sat down and smiled at me. I'd never really noticed it before but he was quite a handsome man.

"Where's everyone else?" he asked, looking around.

"Out somewhere," I replied, waving a hand in the direction of the boat and feeling a bit dizzy. "Lola's probably under her latest beau, Randolph is doubtless complaining to someone about it--and I've no idea where Gran is. Have a drink?"

"You've already poured one."

"So I have. What brings you here, Arnie?"

"Just passing. How are things at work?"

"Shit. Miss Havisham died, and something maybe, perhaps, possibly, is *wrong*--I just don't know what--if at all. Does that make sense?"

"Kind of. I've heard Outlanders sometimes go through a period of 'imagination free fall' where they start trying to create plotlines out of nothing. You'll settle down to it, I shouldn't worry. Congratulations, by the way, I read about your appointment in the paper."

I held up my glass in salute, and we both drank.

"So what's the deal with you and Mary?" I asked.

"Over for a long time. She thinks I'm a loser and--"

"--tells you to go to hell. Yes, I've heard. What about Lola? Have you slept with her yet?"

"No!"

"You must be the only bloke in *Caversham Heights* who

hasn't. Do you want another drink?"

"Okay."

"What about you? Tell me about your husband in the Outland."

"I don't have a husband, never did."

"You told me--"

"Probably one of those 'push off' comments we girls sometimes use. There was this guy named Snood in the ChronoGuard, but that was a long time ago. He suffered a time aggre. Agg-era. Aggreg--"

"A what?"

"He got old before his time. He died."

I felt confused all of a sudden and looked at the wineglass and the half-empty bottle of wine.

"What's the matter, Thursday?"

"Oh--nothing. You know when you suddenly have a memory of something and you don't know why--a sort of *flashback*?"

He smiled. "I don't have many memories, Thursday, I'm a Generic. I could have had a backstory but I wasn't considered important enough."

"Is that a cat? I mean, is that a *fact*? Well, I just thought about the White Horse in Uffington back home. Soft, warm grassland and blue skies, warm sun on my face. Why would I have done that?"

"I have no idea. Don't you think you've had enough to drink?"

"I'm fine. Right as rain. Never better. What's it like being a Generic?"

"It's not bad." He took another swig of wine. "Promotion to a better or new part is always there if you are diligent enough and hang out at the Character Exchange. I miss having a family--that must be good."

"My mum is a hoot, and Dad doesn't exist--he's a time-traveling knight-errant--don't laugh--and I have two brothers. They both live in Swindon. One's a priest and the other . . ."

"Is what?"

I felt confused again. It was probably the wine. I looked at my hand. "I don't know what he does. We haven't spoken in years."

There was another flashback, this time of the Crimea.

"This bottle's empty," I muttered, trying to pour it.

"You have to take the cork out first. Allow me."

Arnold fumbled with the corkscrew and drew the cork after a lot of effort. I think he was drunk. Some people have no restraint.

"What do you think of the Well?" he asked.

"It's all right. Life here is pretty good for an Outlander. No bills to pay, the weather is always good and best of all--no Goliath, SpecOps or my mother's cooking."

"SpecOps can cook?"

I giggled stupidly and so did he. Within a few seconds we had both collapsed in hysterics. I hadn't laughed like this for ages.

The laughter stopped.

"What were we giggling about?" asked Arnold.

"I don't know."

And we collapsed in hysterics again.

I recovered and took another swig of wine. "Do you dance?"

Arnie looked startled for a moment. "Of course."

I took him by the hand and led him through into the living room, found a record and put it on the turntable. I placed my hands on his shoulders and he placed his hands on my waist. It felt odd and somehow wrong, but I was past caring. I had lost a good friend that day and deserved a little unwinding.

The music began and we swayed to the rhythm. I had danced a lot in the past, which must have been with Filbert Snood, I supposed.

"You dance well for someone with one leg, Arnie."

"I have two legs, Thursday."

And we burst out laughing again. I steadied myself on him and he steadied himself on the sofa. Pickwick looked on and ruffled her feathers in disgust.

"Do you have a girl in the Well, Arnie?"

"Nobody," he said slowly, and I moved my cheek against his, found his mouth and kissed him, gently and without ceremony. He began to pull away, then stopped and returned the kiss. It felt dangerously welcome; I didn't know why I had been single for so long. I wondered whether Arnie would stay

the night.

He stopped kissing me and took a step back.

"Thursday, this is all *wrong*."

"What could be wrong?" I asked, staring at him unsteadily. "Do you want to come and see my bedroom? It has a great view of the ceiling."

I stumbled slightly and held the back of the sofa.

"What are you staring at?" I asked Pickwick, who was glaring at me.

"My head's thumping," muttered Arnold.

"So's mine."

Arnold cocked his head and listened. "It's not our heads--it's the door."

"The door of perception," I noted, "of heaven and hell."

He opened the door and a very old woman dressed in blue gingham walked in. I started to giggle but stopped when she strode up to me and took away my wineglass.

"How many glasses have you had?"

"Two?" I replied, leaning against the table for support.

"Bottles," corrected Arnie.

"Crates," I added, giggling, although nothing actually seemed that funny all of a sudden. "Listen here, Gingham Woman," I added, wagging my finger, "give me my glass back."

"What about the baby?" she demanded, staring at me dangerously.

"What baby? Who's having a baby? Arnie, are you having a baby?"

"It's worse than I thought," she muttered. "Do the names Aornis and Landen mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing, but I'll drink to them, if you want. Hello, Randolph."

Randolph and Lola had arrived at the doorstep and were staring at me in shock.

"What?" I asked them. "Have I grown a second head or something?"

"Lola, fetch a spoon," said Gingham Woman. "Randolph, take Thursday to the bathroom."

"Why?" I collapsed in a heap. "I can walk. And why is there a carpet on the wall?"



The next thing I saw was the view down the back of Randolph's legs and the living room floor, then the stairs, as I was carried up over his shoulder. I started to giggle but the rest was a bit blurry. I remember choking and throwing up in the loo, then being deposited in bed, then starting to cry.

"She died. Burned. I tried to help her. It was her hat, you know."

"I know, darling. I'm your grandmother, do you remember?"

"Gran?" I sobbed, realizing who she was all of a sudden. "I'm sorry I called you Gingham Woman!"

"It's okay. Perhaps being drunk is for the best. You're going to sleep now, and dream--and in that dream you'll do battle to win back your memories. Do you understand?"

"No."

She sighed and wiped my forehead with her small, pink hand. It felt reassuring and I stopped crying.

"Be vigilant, my dear. Keep your wits about you and be stronger than you have ever been. We'll see you on the other side, come the morning."

But she was starting to fade as slumber swept over me, her voice ringing in my ears as my mind relaxed and transported me deep into my subconscious.

## The Lighthouse at the Edge of My Mind

The Hades family when I knew them comprised, in order of age, Acheron, Styx, Phlegethon, Cocytus, Lethe, and the only girl, Aornis. Their father had died many years previously, leaving their mother in charge of the youthful and diabolical family all on her own. Described once by Vlad the Impaler as "unspeakably repellent," the Hades family drew strength from deviancy and committing every sort of horror that they could. Some with panache, some with halfhearted seriousness, others with a sort of relaxed insouciance about the whole thing. Lethe, the "white sheep" of the family, was hardly cruel at all--but the others more than made up for him. In time, I was to defeat three of them.

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*Hades: Family from Hell*

**A** WAVE BURST ON the rocks behind me, showering me with cold water and flecks of foam. I shivered. I was on a rocky outcrop in the darkest gale-torn night, and before me stood a lighthouse. The wind whistled and moaned around the tower, and a flash of lightning struck the apex. The bolt coursed down the earthing cable and trailed a shower of sparks, leaving behind the acrid stench of brimstone. The lighthouse was as black as obsidian, and as I looked up, it seemed as though the arc lamp rotating within the vast lenses was floating in midair. The light swept through the inky blackness illuminating nothing but a heaving, angry sea. I looked backwards in my mind but could see nothing--I was without memory or past experiences. This was the loneliest outpost of my subconscious, a memoryless island where nothing existed other than that which I could feel and see and smell at this moment in time. But I still had emotions, and I had a sense of danger, and purpose. Somehow I understood I was here to vanquish--or be vanquished.

Another wave burst behind me, and with beating heart I pulled on the locking lever of the steel front door and was soon inside, safe from the gale. The door securely fastened, I looked around. There was a central spiral staircase but

nothing else--not a stick of furniture, a book, a packing case, nothing.

I shivered again and pulled out my gun.

"A lighthouse," I murmured, "a lighthouse in the middle of nowhere."

I walked slowly up the concrete steps keeping a careful watch as they curved away out of sight. The first floor was empty and I moved on up, each circular room I reached devoid of any signs of habitation. In this way I slowly climbed the tower, gun arm outstretched and trembling with a dread of impending loss that I could not control or understand. On the top floor the spiral staircase ended; a steel ladder was the only means by which to climb any higher. I could hear the electric motors that drove the rotating lamp whine above me, the bright white light shining through the open roof hatch as the beam swept slowly about. But this room was not empty. Sitting in an armchair was a young woman powdering her nose with the help of a small handmirror.

"Who are you?" I asked, pointing my gun at her.

She lowered the mirror, smiled and looked at the pistol.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed. "Always the woman of action, aren't you?"

"What am I doing here?"

"You really don't know, do you?"

"No." I lowered the gun. I couldn't remember any facts but I could feel love and loss and frustration and fear. The woman was linked to one of these but I didn't know which.

"My name is--" The young woman stopped and smiled again.

"No, I think even that is too much."

She rose and walked towards me. "All you need to know is that you killed my brother."

"I'm a murderer?" I whispered, searching in my heart for guilt of such a crime and finding none. "I . . . I don't believe you."

"Oh, it's true, and I will have my revenge. Let me show you something."

She took me to the window and pointed. There was another flash of lightning and the view was illuminated outside. We were on the edge of a massive waterfall that curved away

from us into the darkness. The ocean was emptying over the edge; millions of gallons every second, falling into the abyss. But that wasn't all. In another flash of lightning I could see that the waterfall was rapidly eroding the small island on which the lighthouse was built--as I watched, the first piece of the rocky outcrop fell away noiselessly and disappeared into space.

"What's happening?" I demanded.

"You are forgetting everything," she said simply, sweeping her hands in the direction of the room. "These are a just a few of your memories I have cobbled together--a last stand, if you like. The storm, the lighthouse, the waterfall, the night, the wind--none of them are real." She walked closer to me until I could smell her perfume. "All this is merely a representation of your mind. The lighthouse is you; your consciousness. The sea around us your experience, your memories--everything that makes you the person you are. They are all draining away like water from a bath. Soon the lighthouse will topple into the void and then . . ."

"And then?"

"And then I will have won. You will remember nothing--not even this. You will relearn, of course--in ten years you might be able to tie your own shoelaces. But for the first few years the only decision you will have to make is which side of your mouth to drool out of."

I turned to leave but she called out, "You can't run. Where will you go? For you, there's nowhere else but here."

I stopped at the door and turned back, raised my gun and fired a single shot. The bullet whistled through the young woman and impacted harmlessly on the wall behind.

"It will take more than that, Thursday."

"Thursday? That's my name?"

"It doesn't matter, there is no one you can remember who will help you."

"Doesn't this make your victory hollow?" I demanded, lowering my gun and rubbing my temple, trying to recall even a single fact.

"Ridding your mind of that which you value most was the hard bit. All I had to do then was to invoke your *dread*, the

memory that you feared the most. After that, it was easy."

"My greatest fear?"

She smiled again and showed me the handmirror. There was no reflection, only images that flashed past anonymously. I took the mirror and peered at it, trying to make sense of what I saw.

"These are the images of your life, your memories, the people you love, everything you held dear--but also everything that you've ever feared. I can modify and change them at will--or even delete them completely. But before I do, I'm going to make you view the worst once more. Gaze upon it, Thursday, gaze upon it and feel the death of your brother one last time!"

The mirror showed me the image of a war long ago, the violent death of a soldier who seemed familiar, and I felt the pain of loss tearing through me. The woman laughed as the images repeated themselves, this time clearer, and more graphic. I shut my eyes to block the horror, but opened them again quickly in shock. I had seen something else, right at the edge of my mind, dark and menacing, waiting to engulf me. I gasped, and the woman felt my fear.

"What is it?" she cried. "There is something I have missed? Worse than the Crimea? Let me see!"

She tried to grasp the mirror but I let it drop. It shattered on the concrete floor as we heard a muffled thump of something striking the steel door five stories below.

"What was that?" she demanded.

I realized what I had seen. Its presence, unwelcome for so many years in the back of my mind, might be just what I needed to defeat her.

"My worst nightmare," I told her, "and now yours."

"But it can't be! Your worst nightmare was the Crimea, your brother's death--I know, I've searched your mind!"

"Then," I replied slowly, my strength returning as the woman's confidence trickled away, "you should have searched harder!"

"But it's still too late to help you," she said, her voice quavering, "it will not gain entry, I assure you of that!"

There was another loud crash; the steel door on the ground floor had been torn from its hinges.

"Wrong again," I said quietly. "You asked for my worse fear, my dread, to appear--and it came."

She ran to the stairs and yelled, "Who is there? Who are you? *What* are you?"

But there was no reply; only a soft sigh and the sound of footfalls on the stairs as it climbed slowly upwards. I looked from the window as another section of the rocky island fell away. The lighthouse was now poised on top of the abyss and I could see straight down into the dizzying depths. There was a tremor as the foundations shifted; the lighthouse flexed and a section of plaster fell from the wall.

"Thursday!" she yelled out pitifully. "You can control it! Make it stop!"

She slammed the door to the staircase, her hands shaking as she hurriedly threw the bolt.

"I could hide it if I chose," I said, staring at the terrified woman, "but I choose not. You asked me to gaze upon my fears--now you may join me."

The lighthouse shifted again and a crack opened in the wall revealing the storm-tossed sea beyond; the arc light stopped rotating with a growl of twisted metal. There was a thump at the door.

"There are always bigger fish, Aornis," I said slowly, suddenly realizing who she was as my past began to reveal itself from the fog. "Like all Hadeses, you were lazy. You thought Anton's demise was the worst thing you could dredge up. You never looked further. Hardly looked into my subconscious at all. The old stuff, the terrifying stuff, the stuff that keeps us awake as children, the nightmares we can only half glimpse on waking, the fear we sweep to the back of our minds but which is always there, gloating from a distance."

The door collapsed inwards as the lighthouse swayed and part of the wall fell away. An icy gust blew in, the ceiling dropped two feet and electricity sparked from a severed cable. Aornis stared at the form lurking in the doorway, making quiet slavering noises to itself.

"No!" she whined. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you, I--"

I watched as Aornis's hair turned snow-white, but no scream

came from her dry throat. I lowered my eyes and turned to the door, seeing only a vague shape out of the corner of my eye advancing towards Aornis. She had dropped to her knees and was sobbing uncontrollably. I walked past the shattered door and down the stairs two at a time. As I stepped outside, the outcrop shivered again and the conical roof of the lighthouse came wheeling down amidst masonry and scraps of rusty iron. Aornis found her voice, finally, and screamed.

I didn't pause or break my pace. I could still hear her yelling for mercy as I climbed into the small jolly boat she had kept for her escape and rowed away across the oily black water, her cries only drowned out as the lighthouse collapsed into the abyss, taking the malevolent spirit of Aornis with it.

I paused for a moment, then put my back into rowing, the oars rattling in the rowlocks.

"That was impressive," said a quiet voice behind me. I turned and found Landen sitting in the bow. He was every bit as I remembered him. Tall and good-looking with hair graying slightly at the temples. My memories, which had been blunted for so long, now made him more alive than he had been for weeks. I dropped the oars and nearly upset the small boat in my hurry to fling my arms around him, to feel his warmth. I hugged him until I could barely breath, tears coursing down my cheeks.

"Is it you?" I cried. "*Really* you, not one of Aornis's little games?"

"No, it's me all right." He kissed me tenderly. "Or at least, your memory of me."

"You'll be back for real, I promise!"

"Have I missed much? It's not nice being forgotten by the one you love."

"Well," I began as we made ourselves more comfortable in the boat, lying down to look up at the stars, "there's this upgrade called Ultra Word™, see, and . . ."

We stayed in each other's arms for a long time, the small rowing boat adrift in the museum of my mind, the sea calming before us as we headed towards the gathering dawn.

## Lola Departs and *Heights* Again

Daphne Farquitt wrote her first book in 1936 and had by 1988 written three hundred others exactly like it. *The Squire of High Potternews* was arguably the least worst, although the best you could say about it was that it was a "different shade of terrible." Astute readers have complained that *Potternews* originally ended quite differently, an observation also made about *Jane Eyre*. It is all they have in common.

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*The Jurisfiction Chronicles*

**T**HE FOLLOWING MORNING my head felt as if it had a road drill in it. I lay awake in bed, the sun streaming through the porthole. I smiled as I remembered the defeat of Aornis the night before and mouthed out loud:

"Landen Parke-Laine, Landen Parke-Laine!"

Then I remembered the loss of Miss Havisham and sighed, staring up at the ceiling. After a few minutes of introspection I sat up slowly and stretched. It was almost ten. I staggered to the bathroom and drank three glasses of water, brought it all up again and brushed my teeth, drank more water, sat with my head between my knees, then tiptoed back to bed to avoid waking Gran. She was fast asleep in the chair with a copy of *Finnegans Wake* on her lap. I knew I was going to have to apologize to Arnie and thank him for not taking advantage of the situation. I couldn't believe I had made such a fool of myself but felt that I could, at a pinch, lay most of the blame at Aornis's door.

I got up half an hour later and went downstairs, where I found Randolph and Lola at the breakfast table. They weren't talking to each other and I noticed Lola's small suitcase at the door.

"Thursday!" said Randolph, offering me a chair. "Are you okay?"

"Groggy," I replied as Lola placed a steaming mug of coffee in front of me that I inhaled gratefully. "Groggy but happy--I



got Landen back. Thanks for helping me out last night--and I'm sorry if I made a complete idiot of myself. Arnie must think I'm the worst tease in the Well."

"No, that's me," said Lola innocently. "Your Gran explained to us all about Aornis and Landen. We had no idea what was going on. Arnie understood and he said he'd drop around later and see how you were."

I looked at Lola's suitcase and then at the two of them, who were studiously ignoring each other.

"What's going on?"

"I'm leaving to start work on *Girls Make All the Moves*."

"That's excellent news, Lola," I said, genuinely impressed. "Randolph?"

"Yes, very good. All the clothes and boyfriends she wants."

"You're sour because you didn't get that male-mentor part you wanted," retorted Lola.

"Not at all," replied Randolph, resentment bubbling under the surface. "I've been offered a small part in an upcoming Amis--a proper novel. A *literary* one."

"Well, good luck to you," replied Lola. "Send me a postcard if you can be troubled to talk to anyone in chicklit."

"Guys," I said, "don't part like this!"

Lola looked at Randolph, who turned away. She sighed, stared at me for a moment and then got up.

"Well," she said, picking up her case, "I've got to go. Fittings all morning, then rehearsals until six. Busy busy busy. I'll keep in touch, don't worry."

I got up, held my head for a moment as it thumped badly, then hugged Lola, who hugged me back happily.

"Thanks for all the help, Thursday," she said, tears in her eyes. "I wouldn't have made it up to B-3 without you."

She went to the door and stopped for a moment, looked across at Randolph, who was staring resolutely out the window at nothing in particular.

"Good-bye, Randolph."

"Good-bye," he said without looking up.

Lola looked at me, bit her lip and went across to him and kissed him on the back of the head. She returned to the door, said good-bye to me again and went out.

I sat down next to him. A large tear had rolled down his nose and dropped onto the table. I laid a hand on his.

"Randolph--!"

"I'm fine!" he growled. "I've just got a bit of grit in my eye!"

"Did you tell her how you felt?"

"No, I didn't!" he snapped. "And what's more, I don't want you dictating to me what I should and shouldn't do!"

He got up and stormed off to his bedroom, the door slamming shut behind him.

"Hellooo!" said a Granny Next sort of voice. "Are you well enough to come upstairs?"

"Yes."

"Then you can come and help me down."

I assisted her down the stairs and sat her at the table, fetching a cushion or two from the living room.

"Thanks for your help, Gran. I made a complete fool of myself last night."

"What's life for? Don't mention it. And by the way, it was Lola and me who undressed you, not the boys."

"I think I was past caring."

"All the same. Aornis will have a lot more trouble getting at you in the Outland, my dear--my experience of mnemonomorphs tends to be that once you dispose of a mindworm, the rest is easy. You won't forget her in a hurry, I assure you."

We chatted for an hour, Gran and I, about Miss Havisham, Landen, babies, Anton and all other things besides. She told me about her own husband's eradication and his eventual return. I knew he *had* returned because without him there would be no me, but it was interesting to talk to her nonetheless. I felt well enough to go into *Caversham Heights* at midday to see how Jack was getting on.

"Ah!" said Jack as I arrived. "Just in time. I've been thinking about a full *Caversham Heights* makeover--do you want to have a look?"

"Go on, then."

"Is anything the matter? You look a bit unwell."

"I got myself pickled to the gills last night. I'll be fine. What

have you in mind?"

"Get in. I want you to meet someone."

I climbed into the Allegro and he handed me a coffee. We were parked opposite a large redbrick semi in the north of the town. In the book we stake out this house for two days, eventually sighting the mayor emerging with crime boss Angel DeFablio. With the mayor character excised from the manuscript for an unspecified reason, it would be a long wait.

"This is Nathan Snudd," said Jack, indicating a young man sitting in the backseat. "Nathan is a plotsmith who's just graduated in the Well and has kindly agreed to help us. He has some ideas about the book that I wanted you to hear. Mr. Snudd, this is Thursday Next."

"Hi," I said, shaking his hand.

"The *Outlander* Thursday Next?"

"Yes."

"Fascinating! Tell me, why doesn't glue stick to the inside of the bottle?"

"I don't know. What are your ideas for the book?"

"Well," said Nathan, affecting the manner of someone who knows a great deal, "I've been looking at what you have left and I've put together a rescue plan that uses the available budget, characters and remaining high points of the novel to best effect."

"Is it still a murder inquiry?"

"Oh, yes; and the fight-rigging bit I think we can keep, too. I've bought a few cut-price plot devices from a bargain warehouse in the Well and sewn them in. For instance, I thought that instead of having one scene where Jack is suspended by DCI Briggs, you could have six."

"Will that work?"

"Sure. Then there will be a bad-cop routine where an officer close to you is taking bribes and betrays you to the Mob. I've got this middle-aged, creepy housekeeper Generic we can adapt. In fact, I've got seventeen middle-aged, creepy housekeepers we can pepper about the book."

"Mrs. Danvers, by any chance?" I asked.

"We're working on a tight budget," replied Snudd coldly, "let's not forget that."

"What else?"

"I thought there could be several gangster's molls or a prostitute who wants to go straight and helps you out."

"A 'tart with a heart'?"

"In one. They're ten a penny in the Well at the moment--we should be able to get five for a ha'penny."

"Then what happens?"

"This is the good bit. Someone tries to kill you with a car bomb. I've bought this great little scene for you where you go to your car, are about to start it but find a small piece of wire on the floor mat. It's a cinch and cheap, too. I can buy it wholesale from my cousin; he said he would throw in a missing consignment of Nazi bullion and a sad-loser-detective-drunk-at-a-bar-with-whiskey-and-a-cigarette scene. You are a sad, loner, loser maverick detective with a drink problem, yes?"

Jack looked at me and smiled. "No, not anymore. I live with my wife and have four amusing children."

"Not on this budget." Snudd laughed. "Humorous sidekicks--kids or otherwise--cost bundles."

There was a tap on the window.

"Hello, Prometheus," said Jack, "have you met Thursday Next? She's from the Outland."

Prometheus looked at me and put out a hand. He was an olive-skinned man of perhaps thirty, with tightly curled black hair close to his head. He had deep black eyes and a strong Grecian nose that was so straight you could have laid a set square on it.

"Outland, eh? What did you think of Byron's retelling of my story?"

"I thought it excellent."

"Me, too. When are we going to get the Elgin marbles back?"

"No idea."

Prometheus, more generally known as the fire-giver, was a Titan who had stolen fire from the gods and given it to mankind, a good move or a terrible one, depending on which papers you read. As punishment, Zeus had him chained to a rock in the Caucasus, where his liver was picked out every night by eagles, only to regrow during the day. He looked

quite healthy, in spite of it. What he was doing in *Caversham Heights*, I had no idea.

"I heard you had a spot of bother," he said to Jack, "something about the plot falling to pieces?"

"My attempts to keep it secret don't appear to be working," muttered Jack. "I don't want a panic. Most Generics have a heart of gold, but if there is the sniff of a problem with the narrative, they'll abandon *Heights* like rats from a ship--and an influx of Generics seeking employment to the Well could set the Book Inspectorate off like a rocket."

"Ah," replied the Titan, "tricky indeed. I was wondering if I could offer my services in any way?"

"As a Greek drug dealer or something?" asked Nathan.

"No," replied Prometheus slightly testily, "as Prometheus."

"Oh, yeah?" Snudd laughed. "What are you going to do? Steal fire from the DeFablio family and give it to Mickey Finn?"

Prometheus stared at him as though he were a twit--which he was, I suppose.

"No, I thought I could be here awaiting extradition back to the Caucasus by Zeus' lawyers or something--and Jack could be in charge of witness protection, trying to protect me against Zeus' hit men--sort of like *The Client* but with gods instead of the Mob."

"If you want to cross-genre we have to build from the ground up," replied Snudd disparagingly, "and that takes more money and expertise than you guys will *ever* possess."

"What did you say?" asked Prometheus in a threatening manner.

"You heard me. Everyone thinks it's easy to be a plotsmith."

"What you've described," continued the Titan, showing great restraint, "isn't a crime thriller--it's a mess."

Snudd prodded Prometheus on the tie and sneered, "Well, let me tell you, Mr. Smart-Aleck-Greek-Titan-fire-giver, I didn't spend four years at Plotschool to be told my job by an ex-convict!"

The Titan's lip quivered. "Okay," he snarled, pulling up his shirtsleeves, "you and me. Right now, here on the sidewalk."

"C'mon," said Jack in a soothing manner, "this isn't going to

get us anywhere. Snudd, I think perhaps you should listen to what Prometheus has to say. He might have a point."

"A point?" cried Snudd, getting out of the car but avoiding Prometheus. "I'll tell you the point. You came to me wanting my help and I gave it--now I have to listen to dumb ideas from any myth that happens to wander along. This was a *favor*, Jack--my time isn't cheap. And since this is an ideas free-for-all, let me tell you a home truth: the Great Panjandrum himself couldn't sort out the problems in this book. And you know why? Because it was shit to begin with. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got two subplots to write for proper, paying clients!"

And without another word, Snudd vanished.

"Well," said Prometheus, getting into the backseat, "who needs cretins like him?"

"Me," sighed Jack, "I need all the help I can get. What do you care what happens to us anyway?"

"Well," said the Titan slowly, "I kind of like it here, and all that mail redirection is a pain in the arse. What shall we do now?"

"Lunch?" I suggested.

"Good idea," said Prometheus. "I wait tables at Zorba's in the high street--I can get us a discount."

**Mrs. Bradshaw and Solomon (Judgments) Inc.**

The "police officer being suspended by reluctant boss" plot device was pretty common in the crime genre. It usually happened just before a down-ending second act, when the author sets things up so the reader thinks that there is no way the hero can extricate himself. A down-ending second usually heralds an up-ending third, but not always; you can finish a third down, but it usually works better if the end of the second is up--which means the end of the first should be up, not down.

JEREMY FNORP,

*The Ups and Downs of Act Breaks*

**I** WENT TO WORK as normal the following morning, my head cleared and feeling better than I had for some time. Randolph, however, was inconsolable without Lola and had moped all the previous evening, becoming quite angry that I believed him when he said that nothing was the matter. Gran was out and I slept well for the first time in weeks. I even dreamt of Landen--and wasn't interrupted during the good parts, either.

"I share your grief for Miss Havisham," murmured Beatrice when I arrived at Norland Park.

"Thank you."

"Rotten luck," said Falstaff as I walked past. "There were the remains of a fine woman about Havisham."

"Thank you."

"Miss Next?" It was the Bellman. "Can I have a word?"

I walked over with him to his office and he shut the door.

"So, tell me, how do you feel about joining us permanently?"

"I can stay for a year, but I have a husband back in the real world who doesn't exist and needs me."

"Ah. Well, I'm sorry to hear that. Shame." He scratched his nose nervously. Something was going on that I didn't know about. "Anyway, irrespective of your plans, I will be moving you to less demanding duties. Miss Havisham's death shook us all up and I'm not risking your future health by hurrying you back onto the active list."

"I'm fine, really."

"I'm sure you are--but since you have only recently qualified and are without a mentor, we felt it was better if you were taken off the active list for a while."

" 'We'?"

He picked up his clipboard, which had beeped at him. Havisham had told me that he never actually placed any papers in the all-important clipboard--the words were beamed directly there from Text Grand Central.

"The Council of Genres have taken a personal interest in your case," he said after reading the clipboard. "I think they felt you were too valuable to lose through stress--an Outlander in Jurisfiction is quite a coup, as you know. You have powers of self-determination that we can only dream of. Take it in the good spirit it is meant, won't you?"

"So I don't get to take Havisham's place at Jurisfiction?"

"I'm afraid not. Perhaps when the dust has settled. Who knows? In the BookWorld, anything is possible."

He handed me a scrap of paper. "Report to Solomon on the twenty-sixth floor. Good luck!"

I got up, thanked the Bellman and left his office. There was silence as I walked back past the other agents, who looked at me apologetically. I had been canned through no fault of my own, and everyone knew it. I sat down at Havisham's desk and looked at all her stuff. She had been replaced by a Generic in *Expectations*, and although they would look almost identical, it could never be the same person. The Havisham that I had known had been lost at Pendine sands. I sighed. Perhaps demotion was a good thing. After all, I did have a lot to learn, and working with the C of G for a bit probably had its merits.

"Miss Next?"

It was Commander Bradshaw.

"Hello, sir."

He smiled and raised his hat. "Would you care to have tea with me on the veranda?"

"I'd be delighted."

He smiled, took me by the arm and jumped us both into *Bradshaw Hunts Big Game*. I had never been to East Africa, either in our world or this, but it was as beautiful as I had



imagined it from the many images I had grown up with. Bradshaw's house was a low colonial building with a veranda facing the setting sun; the land around the house was wild scrub and whistling thorns. Herds of wildebeests and zebras wandered across in a desultory manner, their hooves kicking up red dust as they moved.

"Quite beautiful, wouldn't you say?"

"Extraordinary," I replied, staring at the scenery.

"Isn't it just?" He grinned. "Appreciate a woman who knows beauty when she sees it."

His voice lowered a tone. "Havisham was one of the finest, a little too fast for me, but a good egg in a scrap. She was very fond of you."

"And I of her. Mr. Bradshaw--"

"Trafford. Call me Trafford."

"Trafford, do you think it *was* an accident?"

"Well, it looked like one," he said after thinking for a moment, "but then a real one and a written one are pretty similar, even to an expert eye. Mr. Toad was pretty cut up about it and got into a helluva pickle for visiting the Outland without permission. Why, are you still suspicious?"

I shrugged. "It's in my nature. Someone wants me off the active list and it isn't the Bellman. Did Havisham confide in you about Perkins?"

"Only that she thought he'd been murdered."

"Had he?"

"Who knows?" Bradshaw took off his hat and fanned himself with it. "The office think it's Deane, but we'll never know for sure until we arrest him. Have you met the memsahib? My darling, this is Thursday Next--a colleague from work."

I looked up and jumped slightly because Mrs. Bradshaw was, in fact, a gorilla. She was large and hairy and was dressed only in a floral-patterned pinafore.

"Good evening," I said, slightly taken aback, "a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Bradshaw."

"Good evening," replied the gorilla politely, "would you like some cake with your tea? Alphonse has made an excellent lemon sponge."

"That would be nice, thank you," I spluttered as Mrs.

Bradshaw stared at me with her dark, deep-set eyes.

"Excellent! I'll be out in a jiffy to join you. Feet, Trafford."

"What? Oh!" said Bradshaw, taking his boots off the chair opposite. When Mrs. Bradshaw had left, he turned and said to me in a serious whisper, "Tell me, did you notice anything odd about the memsahib?"

"Er," I began, not wanting to hurt his feelings, "not really."

"Think, it's important. Is there anything about her that strikes you as a little out of the ordinary?"

"Well, she's only wearing a pinafore," I managed to say.

"Does that bother you?" he asked in all seriousness. "Whenever male visitors attend, I always have her cover up. She's a fine-looking gal, wouldn't you agree? Drive any man wild, wouldn't you say?"

"Very fine."

He shuffled in his chair and drew closer. "Anything else?" he said, staring at me intently. "Anything at all. I won't be upset."

"Well," I began slowly, "I couldn't help noticing that she was . . ."

"Yes?"

". . . a gorilla."

"Hmm," he said, leaning back, "our little subterfuge didn't fool you, then?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Melanie!" he shouted. "Please come and join us."

Mrs. Bradshaw lumbered back onto the veranda and sat in one of the club armchairs, which creaked under her weight.

"She knows, my love."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Bradshaw, producing a fan and hiding her face. "However did you find out?"

A servant appeared with a tray of teas, left them on the table, bowed and withdrew.

"Is it the hair?" she asked, delicately pouring the tea with her feet.

"Partly," I admitted.

"I told you the powder wouldn't cover it up," she said to Bradshaw in a scolding tone, "and I'm *not* shaving. It makes one itch so. One lump or two?"

"One please," I replied. "Is it a problem?"

"It's no problem *here*," said Mrs. Bradshaw. "I often feature in my husband's books and nowhere does it specify precisely that I am anything but human."

"We've been married for over fifty years," added Bradshaw. "The problem is that we've had an invitation to the Bookies next week and Melanie here is a little awkward in public."

"To hell with them all," I replied. "Anyone who can't accept that the woman you love is a gorilla isn't worth counting as a friend!"

"Do you know," said Mrs. Bradshaw, "I think she's right. Trafford?"

"Right also!" He grinned. "Appreciate a woman who knows when to call a wife a gorilla. Hoorah! Lemon sponge, anyone?"

I took the elevator to the twenty-sixth floor and walked out into the lobby of the Council of Genres, claspings the orders that the Bellman had given me.

"Excuse me," I said to the receptionist, who was busy fielding calls on a footnoterphone, "I have to report to Mr. Solomon."

"Seventh door on the left," she said without looking up. I walked down the corridor amongst the thronging mass of bureaucrats walking briskly hither and thither claspings buff files as though their lives and existence depended on it, which they probably did.

I found the correct door. It opened onto a large waiting room full of bored people who all clutched numbered tickets and stared vacantly at the ceiling. At a door at the far end was a desk manned by a single receptionist. He stared at my sheet when I presented it, sniffed and said, "How did you know I was single?"

"When?"

"Just then, in your description of me."

"I meant *single* as in *solitary*."

"Ah. You're late. I'll wait ten minutes for you and 'His Lordship' to get acquainted, then send the first lot in. Okay?"

"I guess."

I opened the door to reveal another long room, this time with a single table at the far end of it. Sitting at the desk was

an elderly, bewhiskered man dressed in long robes, who was dictating a letter to a stenographer. The walls of the room were covered with copies of letters from satisfied clients; he obviously took himself very seriously.

"Thank you for your letter dated the seventh of this month," said the elderly man as I walked closer. "I am sorry to inform you that this office no longer deals with problems arising with or appertaining to junkfootnoterphones. I suggest you direct your anger towards the FNP's complaints department. Yours very cordially, Solomon. That should do it. Yes?"

"Thursday Next reporting for duty."

"Ah!" he said, rising and giving me a hand to shake. "The *Outlander*. Is it true that--out there--two or more people can talk *at the same time*?"

"In the Outland it happens all the time."

"And do cats do anything else but sleep?"

"Not really."

"I see. And what do you make of this?"

He lifted a small traffic cone onto his desk and presented it with a dramatic flourish.

"It's . . . it's a traffic cone."

"Something of a rarity, yes?"

I chose my words carefully. "In many areas of the Outland they are completely unknown."

"I collect Outlandish objects," he said with a great deal of pride. "You must come and see my novelty-teapot collection."

"I'd be delighted."

He sat down and indicated for me to take a chair. "I was sorry to hear about Miss Havisham; she was one of the best operatives Jurisdiction ever had. Will there be a memorial?"

"Tuesday."

"I'll be sure to send flowers. Welcome to The Judgment of Solomon. It's arbitration, mainly, a bit of licensing. We need someone to look after the crowds outside. It can get a bit impassioned sometimes."

"You're King Solomon?"

The old man laughed. "Me? You must be joking! There aren't enough minutes in the day for one Solomon--as soon as he did that 'divide the baby in two' thing, everyone and his uncle

wanted him to arbitrate--from corporate takeovers to playground disputes. So he did what any right-thinking businessman would do: he franchised. How else do you think he could afford the temple and the chariots and the navy and whatnot? The land he sold to Hiram of Tyre? Give me a break! My real name's Kenneth."

I looked a little doubtful.

"I know what you're thinking. 'The Judgment of Kenneth' *does* sound a bit daft--that's why we are licensed to give judgments under his name. All aboveboard, I assure you. You have to purchase the cloak and grow a beard and go on the training course, but it works out very well. The *real* Solomon works from home, but he sticks only to the ultimate riddles of existence these days."

"What if a franchisee makes a dishonest judgment?"

"Very simple." Kenneth smiled. "The offender will be smitten from on high and forced to spend a painful eternity being tortured mercilessly by sadistic demons from the fieriest depths of hell. Solomon's very strict about *that*."

"I see."

"Good. Let's see the first punter."

I went to the door and asked for ticket holder number 32. A small man with a briefcase walked with me up to Kenneth's table. His knees became quite weak by the time he arrived, but he managed to contain himself.

"Name?"

"Mr. Toves from Text Grand Central, Your Eminence."

"Reason?"

"I need to ask for more exemptions from the 'I before E except after C' rule."

"More?"

"It's part of the upgrade to Ultra Word™, Your Honor."

"Very well, go ahead."

"*Feisty*."

"Approved."

"*Feigned*."

"Approved."

"*Weighty*."

"Approved."

"Believe."

"Not approved."

"Reigate."

"Approved."

"That's it for the moment," said the small man, passing his papers across for Kenneth to sign.

"It is The Judgment of Solomon," said Kenneth slowly, "that these words be exempt from Rule 7b of the arbitrary spelling code as ratified by the Council of Genres."

He stamped the paper and the small man scurried off.

"What's next?"

But I was thinking. Although I had been told repeatedly to ignore the three witches, their premonition about *Reigate* being exempted from the "I before E except after C" rule had just come true. Come to think of it, they had *all* come true. The "blinded dog"--the real Shadow--*had* barked, the "hedgepig"--Mrs. Tiggy-winkle--*had* ironed, and Mrs. Passerby from *Shadow the Sheepdog* *had* cried, " 'Tis time, 'tis time!" There must be something in it. But there were two *other* prophecies. One, I was to be the Bellman, which seemed unlikely in the extreme, and two, I was to beware the "thrice-read rule." What the hell did that mean?

"I'm a busy man," said Kenneth, glaring at me, "I don't need daydreamers!"

"I'm sorry, I was thinking of something the three witches told me."

"Charlatans! And worse--the *competition*."

"Sorry. What do you know of the *thrice-read* rule?"

"Is this a professional consultation?" he asked, sitting back and twiddling his thumbs.

"Staff freebie?" I asked hopefully.

Solomon laughed. "Never heard of any thrice-read rule. Now, you can do me a favor: if you see the three witches again, try and pinch their mailing list. In the meantime, can we have the next customer?"

I ushered them in. It was several characters from *Wuthering Heights* and they were all glaring at one another so much they didn't even recognize me. Heathcliff was wearing dark glasses and saying nothing; he was accompanied by his agent and a

lawyer.

"Proceed!"

"*Wuthering Heights* first-person narrative dispute," said the lawyer, placing a sheet of paper on the table.

"Let me see," said Kenneth slowly, studying the report. "Mr. Lockwood, Catherine Earnshaw, Heathcliff, Nelly Dean, Isabella and Catherine Linton. Are you all here?"

They nodded their heads. Heathcliff looked over his sunglasses at me and winked.

"Well," murmured Kenneth at length, "you all believe that you should have the first-person narrative, is that it?"

"No, Your Worshipfulness," said Nelly Dean, "'tis the otherways. None of us want it. It's a curse to any honest Generic--and some *not* so honest."

"Hold your tongue, serving girl!" yelled Heathcliff.

"Murderer!"

"Say that again!"

"You heard me!"

And they all started to yell at one another until Kenneth banged his gavel on the desk and they were all instantly quiet. The Judgment of Solomon was the last form of arbitration; there was no appeal from here and they all knew it.

"It is The Judgment of Solomon that . . . you should *all* have the first-person narrative."

"What?!" yelled Mr. Lockwood. "What kind of loopy idea is that? How can we all be the first person?"

"It is fair and just," replied Kenneth, placing his fingertips together and staring at them all serenely.

"What will we do?" asked Catherine sarcastically. "Talk at the same time?"

"No," replied Kenneth. "Mr. Lockwood, you will introduce the story, and you, Nelly, will tell the major part of it in deep retrospection; the others will have your say in the following ratios."

Kenneth scribbled on the back of an envelope, signed it and handed it over. They all grumbled for a bit, Nelly Dean the most.

"Mrs. Dean," said Kenneth, "you are, for better or worse, the single linking factor for all the families. Consider yourself

lucky I did not give the whole book to you. It is The Judgment of Solomon--now go!"

And they all filed out, Nelly complaining bitterly while Heathcliff strode ahead, ignoring all the others.

"That was quite good," I said as soon as they had left.

"Do you think so?" asked Kenneth, genuinely pleased by my praise. "Judgmenting is not for everyone, but I quite like it. The trick is to be scrupulously fair and just--you could do with a few Solomon franchises in the Outland. Tell me, do you think Lola will be going to the Bookie Awards next week?"

"You know Lola?"

"Let's just say I have made her acquaintance in the course of my duties."

"I'm sure she'll be there--on the chicklit table, I should imagine--she's starring in *Girls Make All the Moves*."

"Is she really?" he said slowly. "Who's next?"

"I don't know; it depends on the choice available. Sometimes she goes through them alphabetically, other times in order of height."

"Not Lola, next for *me*."

"Sorry," I said, flushing slightly, "I'll go and get them."

It was Emperor Zhark. He seemed surprised to see me and told me what a great agent Miss Havisham had been. I walked him in, and he and Kenneth both stopped when they saw each other. They had clearly met before--but not for some time.

"Zhark!" cried Kenneth, walking around to the front of the desk and offering the emperor a Havana cigar. "You old troublemaker! Haven't seen you for ages! What are you up to?"

"Tyrannical ruler of the known galaxy," he replied modestly.

"Get away! Old 'Slippery Zharky,' the class sneak of form 5C at St. Tabularasa's? Who'd have thought it!"

"It's *Emperor* Zhark, now, old chum," he said through gritted teeth.

"Glad to hear it. Whatever happened to Captain Ahab? Haven't seen him since we left school."

"Ahab?" queried the emperor, brow furrowed.

"You remember. One leg and madder than the March Hare. Set fire to his own trousers for a bet and stocked the school pond with piranhas."



"Oh, *him*. Last I heard he was convinced a white whale was after him--but that was years ago. We should have a reunion; one falls out of touch so easily in the BookWorld."

"Don't I know it," returned Kenneth sadly.

They sat in silence for a moment, recalling various school-friends, I imagine.

"So, Zharky old stick, how can I help you?"

"It's the Rambosians," he said at last, "they just refuse to cede power to me."

"How awkward for you. Is there any reason why they should?"

"Stability, old man, stability. The Rambosians have been responsible for numerous acts of savage satire in the Galactic Federation's daily tabloid *Stars My Destination*. They lampoon me constantly and the cartoons are shockingly insulting."

"So you want to invade?"

"Of course not; that would be wasteful of resources--no, I want them to open their arms and worship me as their one true God. They will give ultimate executive power to me, and in return, I will protect them with the might of the Zharkian Empire."

"Hmm," replied Kenneth thoughtfully, "that wouldn't be because the planet Rambosia is composed of eighteen trillion tons of valuable A-grade nutmeg, now would it?"

"Not in the least," replied the emperor unconvincingly.

"Very well. It is The Judgment of Solomon that you make peace with the Rambosians."

"What?!"

The emperor jumped to his feet and went as dark as a thundercloud. He jabbed a long, slender finger in Kenneth's direction. Anywhere in the Zharkian Empire books such an action would have spelt instant death. Kenneth merely raised an eyebrow.

"You'll never play golf at the Old White Male Club again," yelled Zhark. "I'll have you blackballed so far out you won't be able to get your hat checked even if you come in the company of the Great Panjandrum himself!"

And so saying, he threw his cloak behind him, made a large huff noise, turned on his heels and strode to the door.

"Well," said Kenneth, "tyrants are all the same--shocking temper when they don't get their own way! Who's next?"

## 30.

### Revelations

Commander Bradshaw did much of the booksploring in the early years, before the outlying Rebel Book Categories were brought within the controlling sphere of the Council of Genres. Inexplicably, novels can only be visited when someone has found a way in--and a way out. Bradshaw's mapping of the known BookWorld (1927-49) was an extraordinary feat, and until the advent of the ISBN Positioning System (1962), Bradshaw's maps were the *only* travel guide to fiction. Not all booksploring ends so happily. Ambrose Bierce was lost trying to access Poe. His name, along with many others, is carved on the Boojumorial, situated in the lobby of the Great Library.

RONAN EMPYRE,  
*A History of Gibbons*

I COULDN'T FIND THE three witches, no matter how hard I looked. Their prophecies bothered me but not enough to keep me from sleeping soundly that night. It was two days later that I came home from a long day of Solomon's judgments to find Arnie waiting for me. He and Randolph were drinking some beers in the kitchen and talking about the correct time to use a long dash to designate interrupted speech.

"You can use it any--"

"Arnie, I owe you an apology," I said, blushing and forgetting my manners, "you must think me the worst tease in the Well."

"No, that would be Lola. Forget it. Gran explained everything. How are you? Memories returned?"

"All present and correct."

"Good. Dinner sometime--as good friends, of course?" he added hastily.

"I'd love to, Arnie. And thanks for being . . . so . . . well, decent."

He smiled and looked away.

"Beer?" said Randolph, who seemed to have recovered from his Lola-induced trauma.

"Anything nonalcoholic?"

He passed me a carton of orange juice and I poured myself a glass.

"Are you going to tell her?" said Arnie.

"Tell me what?"

"I didn't get the Amis part," began Randolph, "but I've been shortlisted for a minor speaking appearance in the next Wolfe."

"That's excellent news!" I responded happily. "When?"

"Sometime in the next couple of years. I'm going to do some standing-in work until then; the C of G has opened up travel writing as holiday destinations for Generics--no more away-day breaks in Barsetshire. I'm to cover for Count Smorltork while he goes on holiday for two weeks in Wainwright's *A Pictorial Guide to the Lakeland Fells*."

"Congratulations."

Randolph thanked me but was still somehow distant. He stared out of the porthole at the lake, deep in thought.

"What about you?" asked Arnie. "What will you do? Your demotion is all over the Well!"

"It's not a demotion. Well, perhaps it is."

"Word is that Harris Tweed is up to be the next Bellman," murmured Arnie, "despite his low experience. Jurisdiction favors an Outlander."

"What's so special about Outlanders?" asked Randolph.

"I think the C of G like our independence. We are not bound to our narrative, nor--in theory--do we favor one genre over another."

"And memories," murmured Arnie wistfully. "Love to be able to remember a childhood. *Any* childhood."

"Sense of smell, too," I added.

Randolph picked up the copy of *The Little Prince* that had been lying on the table and placed it on his nose.

"*Under* your nose," I told him, "and inhale deeply."

Randolph inhaled deeply and then exhaled. He looked confused. "What's meant to happen?"

"You kind of taste it in your head. Here."

I took the book and sniffed at it delicately. I had expected the odor of leather, but instead I could smell sweet melons--*cantaloupes*. I was transported back to the last time I had come

across this particular scent: the odd boxy truck in *Caversham Heights*. The truck without texture, the automaton driver without personality. Something clicked.

"It was an UltraWord™ truck," I murmured, searching through my bag for the angular and textureless bolt I had picked up after the truck had departed. I found it and sniffed at it cautiously, my mind racing as I tried to think of a connection.

"If this is anything to go by," said Arnie, flicking through the pages of *The Little Prince*, "then the readers are in for a treat."

"They are indeed," I replied as Randolph tried to open the cover--but couldn't.

I took it from him and the book opened easily. I handed it back but the cover was still stuck fast.

"Odd," I muttered as Arnie opened it again without any problem.

"It's Havisham's copy," I said slowly, "she's read it, and me, and now you."

"A book which only three people can read!" observed Randolph scornfully. "A bit mean, I must say!"

"Only three readers," I murmured, my heart going cold as I recalled the three witches' prophecy: *Beware the thrice-read rule!* Perhaps the new operating system was not quite the egalitarian advance it claimed--if it was really the case that Ultra Word™ books could only be opened by three people, then libraries would be a thing of the past. Secondhand bookshops closed overnight. You could only lend a book twice. I thought of the increased revenue that might be generated from such a commercially useful attribute and shook my head sadly. I had been right. There *was* something rotten in the state of fiction!

"Thursday?" asked Arnie. "Are you okay?"

I put *The Little Prince* down. "Yes--just one of those epiphanic moments that fiction seems to be littered with."

"Ah!" said Randolph knowledgeably. "We learnt all about *those* at Tabularasa's."

I got up and walked about the kitchen, thinking hard. The angular truck, the strange bolt? What did that all mean? I shivered. If something was so insidiously wrong with the new

upgrade that they would kill to keep it quiet, then the "thrice-read rule" was just the beginning--after all, a timed readblock would only affect readers in the Outland--it wouldn't affect the BookWorld at all. There *had* to be more.

"Problems?" asked Arnie, sensing my disquiet.

"It's the Ultra Word™ upgrade."

"Bad?"

"The worst. I was removed from Jurisdiction for a reason--who other than the grieving apprentice to ask awkward questions? Miss Havisham was sure there was something wrong with Ultra Word™. Her death proves it."

"I think at best it only *suggests* it," declared Randolph, who had obviously been studying law as part of his Amis bit part. "Without any evidence it will be hard to prove. Did she or any of the others say *anything* to you about it?"

I thought hard. "From Havisham and Perkins--nothing. And all I got from Snell was gobbledygook on his deathbed. He might have told me everything, but it was so badly spelled I didn't understand a word."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'Thirsty! Wode--Cone, udder whirled--doughnut Trieste--!' or something quite like it."

Arnie exchanged looks with Randolph.

"The *Thirsty* must be *Thursday*," murmured Arnie.

"I figured that," I returned, "but what about the rest?"

"Do you suppose," said Randolph thoughtfully, "that if you were to recite those words near a source of misspelling, they would revert back again?"

There was one of those long pauses that usually accompany a flash of brilliance.

"It's worth a try," I replied, thinking hard. I checked the clip of my automatic and opened my TravelBook.

"Where are you going?" asked Arnie.

"To visit the Anti-misspelling Fast Response Group on the seventeenth floor. I think they might be able to help."

"Will they want to?"

I shrugged. "Asking wasn't part of the plan."

The elevator doors opened on the seventeenth floor. This held

all the books whose authors began with Q, and since there weren't that many of them, the remainder of the space had been given over to the Jurisdiction Anti-mispeeling Fast Response Group. If any live mispeeling vyirus was at Jurisdiction, this would be the place to find it.

This floor of the Great Library was more dimly lit than the others, and the rows of bunk beds containing the DanverClones began soon after the Quiller-Couch novels ended. The Danvers were all sitting bolt upright, their eyes following me silently as I walked slowly down the corridor. It was disquieting to be sure, but I could think of no other place to look.

I reached the central core of the library, a circular void surrounded by a wrought-iron rail at the center of the four corridors. The way I had come was all Danvers, and so were two of the others. The fourth corridor was lined with packing cases of dictionaries, and beyond them, the medical area in which I had last seen Snell. I walked closer, my feet making no noise on the padded carpet. Perhaps Snell had known as much as Perkins? They were partners, after all. I cursed myself for not thinking of this before.

I arrived at the small medical unit that was ready and waiting to deal with any infected person. The shielded curtains, the bandages overprinted with dictionary entries. They could soothe and contain but rarely cure--Snell was doomed as soon as he was soaked in the vyirus and he knew it.

I opened a few drawers here and there but found nothing. Then, I noticed a large pile of dictionaries stacked by themselves in a roped-off area. I walked closer, repeating the word *ambidextrous* as I did so.

"Ambidextrous . . . ambidextrous . . . ambidextrous . . . ambidextruos."

Bingo. I'd found it.

"Miss Next? What in heaven's name are you doing here?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin. If it had been Libris, I would have been worried; but it wasn't--it was Harris Tweed.

"You nearly scared me half to death!" I told him.

"Sorry!" He grinned. "What are you up to?"

"There's something wrong with Ultra Word™."

Tweed looked up and down the corridor and lowered his voice. "I think so, too," he hissed, "but I'm not sure what--I've a feeling that it uses a faster 'memory fade' utility than Version 8.3 so the readers will want to reread the book more often. The Council of Genres are interested in upping their published ReadRates--the battle with nonfiction is hotting up; more than they care to tell *us* about."

It was the sort of thing I had suspected.

"What have *you* discovered?" he asked.

I leaned closer. "UltraWord™ has a 'thrice only' read capability."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Tweed. "Find anything else?"

"Not yet. I was hoping to discover what Snell said before he died. It was badly mispeled but I thought perhaps I could *unmispel* it by repeating it close to a mispeling source."

"Good thought, but we must take care." Tweed donned a pair of dictosafe gloves. "Sit here and repeat Snell's words." He placed a chair not a yard from the pile of dictionaries. "I'll remove one OED at a time and we'll see what happens."

"*Wode--Cone, udder whirled--doughnut Trieste*," I recited as Tweed pulled a single dictionary from the large pile that covered the vyirus. "*Wode--Cone, ulder whirled--doughnut Trieste*."

"Who else knows about this?" he asked. "If what you say is true, this knowledge is dangerous enough to have killed three times--I hate to say it, but I think we have a rotten apple at Jurisfiction."

"I told no wun at Jurizfaction. *Wede--Caine, ulder whorled--dogn't Trieste*."

Harris carefully removed another dictionary. I could see the faint purple glow from within the stacked books.

"We don't know who we can trust," he said somberly. "Who *did* you tell, precisely? It's important, I need to know."

He removed another dictionary.

"*Twede--Caine, ulter whorled--dogn't Truste*."

My heart went cold. *Twede*. Could that be *Tweed*? I tried to look normal and glanced across at him, attempting to figure out if he had heard me. I had good reason to be concerned; if he removed one too many dictionaries, I could be fatally mispeled into a *Thirsty Neck* or something--and nobody knew I



was here.

"I cane right you a liszt if it wood yelp," I said, trying to sound as normal as I could.

"Why not just tell me," he said, still smiling. "Who was it? Some of those Generics at *Caversham Heights*?"

"I tolled the bell, man."

The smile dropped from his face. "Now I know you're lying."

We stared at one another. Tweed was no fool; he knew his cover was blown.

"*Tweed*," I said, the unmispeling now complete, "*Kaine--Ultra Word--Don't trust!*"

I jumped aside as soon as I had said it. I was only just in time--Tweed yanked out three dictionaries near the bottom and the dictosafe partially collapsed.

I sprawled on the ground as the heavy glow, emanating in one direction from the disrupted pile of dictionaries, instantly turned the hospital bed behind me into an *hospitable ted*, a furry stuffed bear who waved his paw cheerfully and told me to pop round for dinner any day of the week--and to bring a friend.

I threw myself at Tweed, who was not as quick as I, my speech returning to normal almost immediately.

"Snell and Perkins?!" I yelled pinning him to the ground. "Who else? Havisham?"

"It's not important," he cried as I took his gun and forced his chin into the carpet.

"You're wrong!" I told him angrily. "What's the problem with Ultra WordTM?"

"Nothing's wrong with it," he replied, trying to sound reasonable. "In fact, everything's *right* with it! Control of the BookWorld will have never been easier. And with modern and freethinking Outlanders like you and I, we can take fiction to new and dizzying heights!"

I pushed my knee harder into the back of his neck and he yelped.

"And where does Kaine come into this?"

"Ultra WordTM benefits everyone, Next. Us in here and publishers out there. It's the perfect system!"

"Perfect? You need to resort to murder to keep it on track?"

How can it be perfect?"

"You don't understand, Next. In the Outland murder is morally reprehensible, but in here it as a narrative necessity--without it and the jeopardy it generates, we'd have lost a million readers long ago!"

"She was my friend, Tweed!" I yelled. "Not some cannon fodder for a cheap thriller!"

"You're making a big mistake," he replied, face still pressed into the carpet. "I can offer you an important position at Text Grand Central. With UltraWord™ under our control we will have the power to change anything we please within fiction. You gave *Jane Eyre* a happy ending--we can do the same with countless others and give the reading public what they want. We will dictate terms to that moth-eaten bunch of bureaucrats at the Council of Genres and forge a new, stronger fiction that will catapult the novel to new heights--no longer will we be looked down upon by the academic press and marginalized by nonfiction!"

I had heard enough. "You're finished, Tweed. When the Bellman hears what you've been up to--!"

"The Bellman is only a tool of Text Grand Central, Next. He does what we tell him. Release me and take your place at my side. Untold adventures and riches await you--we can even write your husband back."

"Not a chance. I want the real Landen or none at all."

"You won't know the difference. Take my hand--I won't offer it again."

"No deal."

"Then," he said slowly, "it is good-bye."

I saw something out of the corner of my eye and moved quickly to my right. A pickax handle glanced off my shoulder and struck the carpet. It was Uriah Hope. No wonder Tweed hadn't seemed that worried. I rolled off Tweed and dodged Uriah's next blow, pushing myself backwards along the carpet in my haste to get away. He swung again and shattered a desk, wedging the handle in the wood and struggling with it long enough for me to get to my feet and raise my gun. I wasn't quick enough and he knocked it from my grasp; I ducked the next blow and ran back towards Tweed, who was starting to

get up. He hooked my ankle and I came crashing down. I rolled onto my back as Uriah jumped towards me with a wild cry. I put out a foot, caught him on the chest and heaved. His momentum carried him over onto the pile of dictionaries--and the misspelling virus. Tweed tried to grab me but I was off and running down the corridor as the DanverClones began to stir.

"Kill her!" screamed Tweed, and the Danvers started to move off their bunk beds and walk slowly towards me. I took my TravelBook from my pocket, opened it at the right page and stopped, right in the middle of the corridor. I couldn't outrun them but I could *outread* them. As I jumped out, I could just feel the bony fingers of the Danvers clutching my rapidly vanishing form.

I jumped clean into Norland Park. Past the striking nursery characters and the frog-faced doorman to appear a little too suddenly in the Jurisdiction offices. I ran straight into the Red Queen, who collapsed and in turn knocked over Benedict and the Bellman. I quickly grabbed Benedict's pistol in case Tweed or Hope arrived ready for action and was consequently attacked from an unexpected quarter. Mistaking my intentions, the Red Queen grabbed my gun arm and twisted it around behind me while Benedict tackled me round the waist and pulled me down yelling, "Gun! Protect the Bellman!"

"Wait!" I shouted. "There's a problem with Ultra Word™!"

"What do you mean?" demanded the Bellman when I had surrendered the gun. "Is this some sort of joke?"

"No joke. It's Tweed--"

"Don't listen to her!" shouted Tweed, who had just appeared. "She is an ambitious murderer who will stop at nothing to get what she wants!"

The Bellman looked at us both in turn. "You have proof of this, Harris?"

"Oh, yes--more proof than you'll ever need. Heep, bring it in."

Uriah Hope--or *Heep* as he was now--had survived the misspelling but had been changed irrevocably. Whilst before he had been *adventurous*, he was, thanks to the virus, *cadaverous*; *thin* instead of *lithe*, *fawning* instead of *frowning*. But that was,

for the moment, by the by. Uriah was holding the stained pillowcase that contained Snell's head. Not his own, of course--the plot device Snell had paid so much for in the Well.

"We found this in Thursday's home," announced Tweed, "hidden in the broom cupboard. Heep, would you?"

The thin and sallow youth, whose hair was now *oily* rather than *curly*, laid the bag on a table and lifted the head out by its hair. A gasp came from Benedict's lips and the Red Queen crossed herself.

"Heavens above," murmured the Bellman, "it's Godot!"

## 31.

### Tables Turned

**Insider Trading:** Slang term for Internal Narrative Manipulation. Illegal since 1932 and contrary to item B17(g) of the Narrative Continuity Code, this self-engineered plot fluctuation is so widespread within the BookWorld that it is dealt with on a discretionary basis to enable it to be enforced at all. Small manipulation such as dialogue violations are generally ignored, but larger unlicensed plot adjustments are aggressively investigated. The most publicized flaunting of these rules was by Heathcliff when he burned down Wuthering Heights. Fined and sentenced to 150 hours community service within *Green Eggs and Ham*, Heathcliff was just one of many high-profile cases that Jurisfiction were prosecuting at that time.

CAT FORMERLY KNOWN AS CHESHIRE,  
*Guide to the Great Library* (glossary)

I HAD UNDERESTIMATED TWEED or the power he wielded in the BookWorld. Until then I don't think I'd realized just how far they would warp the narrative to realize their ambitions. I was still standing there gaping like an idiot when Heep grasped me painfully by the arm and twisted it around, pushing me into a bookcase as he did so.

"I be ever so humbly sorry about this, Miss Next," he whined, the mispelings having gone deeper than his skin and rotted his very soul. "Imagine me, an A-7 arresting a pretty Outlander such as yourself!"

His breath smelt rotten; I breathed through my mouth to avoid gagging. He reached in for my TravelBook and took the opportunity to slide his hand across my breast; I struggled harder--but to no avail.

"That head's not mine!" I shouted, realizing how stupid it sounded straightaway.

"That is one thing we *are* certain of," replied Tweed quietly. "Why did you kill him?"

"I didn't. It's Snell's," I said somewhat uselessly, "he bought it for use in his next book and asked me to keep it for him."

"Snell, insider trading? Any other ills you'd like to heap on

the dead? I don't think that's very likely--and how did it turn out to be Godot's? Coincidence?"

"I'm being framed," I replied, "Godot's head in a bag in my closet? Isn't that a chapter ending too slick to be anything but an engineered dramatic moment?"

I stopped. I had been told many times by my SpecOps instructors that the biggest mistake anyone can make in a high-stress situation is to act too fast and say too much before thinking. I needed time--a commodity that was fast becoming a rarity.

"We have evidence of her involvement in at least three other murders, Mr. Bellman," said Tweed.

The Bellman sighed and shook his head sadly as I was relieved of my TravelBook and handcuffed to three anvils to stop me jumping out.

"Havisham?" he asked with a tremor in his voice.

"We believe so," replied Tweed.

"They're fooling you, Mr. Bellman, sir," I said, trying to sound as normal as I could. "Something is badly wrong with UltraWordTM."

"That something is you, Next," spat Tweed. "Four Jurisdiction agents dead in the line of duty--and Deane nowhere to be found. I can't believe it--you'd kill your own mentor?"

"Steady, Tweed," said the Bellman, drawing up a chair and looking at me sadly. "Havisham vouched for her and that counts for something."

"Then let me educate you, Mr. Bellman," said Tweed, sitting on the corner of a table. "I've been making a few inquiries. Even discounting Godot, there is more than enough evidence of Next's perfidy."

"Evidence?" I scoffed. "Such as what?"

"Does the code word *sapphire* mean anything to you?"

"Of course."

"Only eight Jurisdiction agents had access to *The Sword of the Zenobians*," said Tweed, "and four of them are dead."

"It's hardly a smoking gun, is it?"

"Not on its own," replied Tweed carefully, "but when we add other facts, it starts to make sense. Bradshaw and Havisham eject from *Zenobians* leaving you alone with Snell--they arrive

a few minutes later and he is mortally mispeled. Very neat, very clever."

"Why?" I asked. "Why would I kill Miss Havisham? Why would I want to kill *any* of these people?"

"Ambition."

"What ambition? All I want to do is to have my child and go home."

"The Bellman's job," announced Tweed like a hidden trump. "As an Outlander you have seniority, but only after Bradshaw, Havisham, Perkins, Deane--and me. Bradshaw has been the Bellman already, so that rules him out. Were you going to kill me next?"

"I have no ambition to be the Bellman and didn't kill Miss Havisham," I muttered, trying to think of a plan of action.

Tweed leaned closer. "You've been using Jurisfiction as a springboard to feed your own burning ambition. It's a dangerous thing to possess. Ambition will sustain for a while--and then it kills indiscriminately."

The Bellman, who up until this moment had been quiet, suddenly said, "I'll need more proof than your say-so, Mr. Tweed."

"Indeed," replied Tweed triumphantly, "as you know, the three witches have to log all their prophecies. They don't like to do it, but they have to--no paperwork, no license to read chicken entrails. Simple as that."

He pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket. "The day after Miss Next arrived, they filed this report." He handed the paper to the Bellman. "Read the third on the list."

"Prophecy three," read the Bellman slowly, "*Thou shalt be Bellman thereafter.*"

Tweed retrieved the sheet of paper and slid it across the table to me. "Do you deny this?"

"No," I said glumly.

"We call it *Macbeth's syndrome*," said the Bellman sadly, "an insane desire to fulfill your own prophecies. It's nearly always fatal. Sadly, not only for the sufferer."

"I'm not a Macbeth sufferer, Mr. Bellman, and even if I am, shouldn't even the smallest error in Ultra Word™ be looked at?"

"There aren't any errors," put in Tweed, "Ultra Word™ is the finest piece of technology we have ever devised--foolproof, stable and totally without error. Tell me the problem--I'm sure there is a satisfactory explanation."

"Well--" I stopped myself. I knew the Bellman was still an honest man. Should I tell him about the thrice-read problem and risk Tweed covering his tracks even more? On reflection, probably not. The more I dug, the more would be found against me. I needed breathing space--I needed to *escape*.

"What's to become of me?"

"Permanent expulsion from the BookWorld," replied Tweed. "We don't have enough evidence to convict but we do have enough to have you banned from fiction forever. There is no appeals procedure. I only have to ratify it with the Bellman."

"Well," said the Bellman, tingling his bell sadly, "I must concur with Tweed's recommendation. Search her for any BookWorld accessories before we send her back."

"You're making a mistake, Mr. Bellman," I said angrily, "a very--"

"Oooh!" said Heep, who had been rummaging in my pockets and taking the opportunity to try to touch my breasts again. "Look what I've found!"

It was the Suddenly, a Shot Rang Out! plot device Snell had given me at the Slaughtered Lamb.

"A plot device, Miss Next?" said Tweed, taking the small glass globe from Heep. "Do you have any paperwork for this?"

"No. It's evidence. I just forgot to sign it in."

"Illegal carriage of all Narrative Turning Devices is strictly illegal. Are you a dealer? Who's your source? Peddle this sort of garbage in teenage fiction?"

"Blow it out of your arse, Tweed."

"What did you say?"

"You heard me."

He went crimson and might have hit me, but all I wanted was for him to move close enough for me to kick him--or his hand, at least.

"You piece of crap," he sneered. "I've known you were no good from the moment I saw you. Think you're something special, Miss SpecOps Outlander supremo?"



"At least I don't work for the Skyrail, Tweed. Inside fiction you're a big cheese, but out in the real world you're less than a nobody!"

It had the desired effect. He took a step closer and I kicked out, connected with his hand and the small glass globe went sailing into the air, high above our heads. Heep, coward that he now was, dived for cover, but Tweed and the Red Queen, wary of a Narrative Turning Device going off in a confined area, tried to catch it. They might have been successful if just one of them had attempted it. As it was, they collided with a grunt and the small glass globe fell to the floor and shattered as they looked on helplessly.

Suddenly, a shot rang out. I didn't see where it came from but felt its full effect; the bullet hit the chain that was holding me to the anvils, shattering it neatly. I didn't pause for breath. I was off and running towards the door. I didn't know where I was heading; without my TravelBook I was trapped and *Sense and Sensibility* was not that big. Tweed and Heep were soon on their feet, only to hit the floor again as a second volley followed the first. I ducked through the door and came upon . . . Vernham Deane, pistol in hand. Heep and Tweed returned fire as Deane holstered his pistol and took both my hands.

"Hold tight," he said, "and empty your mind. We're going to go *abstract*."

I cleared my mind as much as I could and--1

"How odd!" said Tweed, walking to the place he had last seen Thursday. He knew she couldn't jump without her book, but something was wrong. She had *vanished*--not with the fade out of a standard bookjump, but an instantaneous departure.

Heep and the Bellman joined him, Heep with a bookhound on a leash, who sniffed the ground and whimpered and yelped noisily, chops slobbering.

"No scent?" said the Bellman in a puzzled tone. "No destination signature? Harris, what's going on?"

"I don't know, sir. With your permission I'd like to set up textual sieves on every floor of the Great Library. Heep will be your personal bodyguard from now on; Next is

quite clearly insane and will try to kill you--I have no doubt about that. Do I have your permission to apply for an Extremely Prejudicial Termination order from the Council of Genres?"

"No, that is one step I am not prepared to take. Order the death of an Outlander? Not I."

Tweed made to move off but the Bellman called him back. "Tweed, Thursday said there was a problem with UltraWordTM do you think we should contact Text Grand Central and delay its release?"

"You mean you take all this seriously, sir?" exclaimed Tweed in a shocked tone. "Excuse me for being so blunt, but Next is a murderer and a liar--how many more people does she have to kill before she is stopped?"

"UltraWordTM is bigger than all of us," said the Bellman slowly, "even if she is a murderer, she still might have found something wrong. I cannot afford to take any risks over the new upgrade."

"Well, we can delay," said Tweed slowly, "but that would take the inauguration of the new Operating System out of your term as Bellman. If you think that is the best course of action, perhaps we should take it. But whichever Bellman signs Ultra WordTM into law might be looked on favorably by history, do you not think?"

The Bellman rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"What more tests could we do?" he asked at length.

Tweed smiled. "I'm not sure, sir. We fixed the flight manual conflict and debugged AutoPageTurnDeluxeTM. The raciness overheat problem has been fixed, and the Esperanto translation module is now working one hundred percent. All these faults have been dealt with openly and transparently. We need to upgrade and upgrade now--the popularity of nonfiction is creeping up and we have to be vigilant."

Heep ran up and whispered in Tweed's ear.

"That was one of our intelligence sources, sir. It seems that Next has been suffering from a mnemonomorph recently."

"Great Scott!" gasped the Bellman. "She might not even

know she had done it!"

"It would explain that convincing act," added Tweed. "A woman with no memory of her evil has no guilt. Now, do I have your permission to apply for an Extremely Prejudicial Termination order?"

"Yes," sighed the Bellman, taking a seat, "yes, you better had--and Ultra Word™ is to go ahead, as planned. We have dithered enough."

We jumped back into the Jurisfiction offices. Tweed and Heep were alone with the Bellman, overseeing a document that I found out later was my termination warrant. I had Deane's gun pointed--at Deane. He had his hands up. Heep and Tweed exchanged nervous glances.

"I've brought you Deane, Bellman," I announced. "I had no other way of proving my innocence. Vern, tell them what you told me."

"Go to hell!"

I whacked him hard on the back of the head with the butt of his pistol and he fell to the ground, momentarily stunned. Blood welled up in his hairline and I winced; luckily, no one saw me.

"That's for Miss Havisham," I told him.

"Miss Havisham?" echoed the Bellman.

"Oh, yes," I replied. "Bastard."

Deane touched the back of his head and looked at his hand.

"Bitch!" he muttered. "I'd have killed you, too!"

He turned and leaped at me with surprising speed, grasped me by the throat before I could stop him, and we both crashed to the floor, knocking over a table as we went. It was an impressive charade.

"The little slut serving wench deserved to die!" he screamed. "How dare she spoil the happy life that could have been mine!"

I couldn't breath and started to black out. I had wanted it to look realistic--and so, I suppose, did he.

Tweed placed a gun under Deane's chin and forced him off. He spat in my face as I lay there, trying to get my breath back. Deane was then set upon by Heep, who took an unhealthy

delight in beating him despite apologizing superciliously every time he struck him.

"Stop!" yelled the Bellman. "Calm down, all of you!"

They propped the now bleeding Deane in a chair and Heep bound his hands.

"Did you kill Perkins?" asked the Bellman, and Deane nodded sullenly.

"He was going to blow the whistle on me--Havisham, too. Snell and Mathias just got in the way. Happiness should have been mine!" he sobbed. "Why did the slut have to turn up with that little bastard--I should have married Miss O'Shaugnessy--all I wanted was something no evil squire in Farquitt ever gets!"

"And what was that?" asked the Bellman sternly.

"A happy ending."

"Pitiful, wouldn't you say, Tweed?"

"Pitiful, yes, sir," he replied stonily, staring at me as I picked myself off the floor.

The Bellman tore up my termination order. "It looks like we have underestimated you," he said happily. "I knew Havisham couldn't be wrong. Tweed, I think you owe Miss Next an apology."

"I apologize unreservedly," replied Tweed through gritted teeth.

"Good," said the Bellman. "Now, Thursday, what's the problem with Ultra Word™?"

It was a sticky moment. We had to take this higher than the Bellman. With Libris and the whole of Text Grand Central involved, there was no knowing what they would do. I remembered an error from an early Ultra Word™ test version.

"Well," I began, "I think there is a flight manual conflict. If you read an UltraWord™ book on an airship, it can play havoc with the flight manuals."

"That's been cured," said the Bellman kindly, "but thank you for being so diligent."

"That's a relief. May I have some leave?"

"Of course. And if you find any other irregularities in UltraWord™, I want them brought to me and me alone."

"Yes, sir. May I?" I indicated my TravelBook.

"Of course! Very impressive job capturing Deane, don't you think, Tweed?"

"Yes," replied Tweed grimly, "very impressive--well done, Next."

I opened my TravelBook and read myself to Solomon's outer office. Tweed wouldn't try anything at the C of G, and the following three days were crucial. Everything I needed to say to the Bellman would have to wait until I had seven million witnesses.

## The 923rd Annual BookWorld Awards

The Annual BookWorld Awards (or Bookies) were instigated in 1063 C.E. and for the first two hundred years were dominated by Aeschylus and Homer, who won most of the awards in the thirty or so categories. Following the expansion in fiction and the inclusion of the oral tradition, categories totaled two hundred by 1423. Technical awards were introduced twenty years later and included Most Used English Word and the Most Widely Mispelt Word, witch has remained a contentious subject ever since. By 1879 there were over six hundred categories, but neither the length of the awards nor the vote-rigging scandal in 1964 has dented the popularity of this glittering occasion--it will remain one of the BookWorld's most popular fixtures for years to come.

COMMANDER TRAFFORD BRADSHAW, CBE,  
*Bradshaw's Guide to the BookWorld*

I STOOD OFFSTAGE AT the Starlight Room, one in a long line of equally minor celebrities, all awaiting our turn to go and read the nominations. The hospitality lounge where we had all been mustered was about the size of a football pitch, and the massed babble of excited voices sounded like rushing water. I had been trying to avoid Tweed all evening. But whenever I lost him, Heep would take over. There were others about, too. Bradshaw had pointed out Orlick and Legree, two other assistants of Tweed's that he thought I should be wary of.

Of them all, Heep was the most amateur. His skills at unobserved observation were woefully inadequate.

"Well!" he said when I caught him staring at me. "You and me both waiting for awards!" He rubbed his hands and tapped his long fingers together. "I ask you, me all humble and you an Outlander. Thanks to you and the mispeling incident I'm up for Most Creepy Character in a Dickens Novel. What would you be up for?"

"I'm giving one, not accepting one, Uriah--and why are you following me?"

"Apologies, ma'am," he said, squirming slightly and clasping

his hands together to try to stop them from moving, "Mr. Tweed asked me to keep a particular close eye on you in case of an attack, ma'am."

"Oh, yes?" I replied, unimpressed by the lame cover story. "From whom?"

"Those who would wish you harm, of course. ProCaths, bowdlerizers--even the townspeople from *Shadow*. It was them what tried to kill you at Solomon's, I'll be bound."

Sadly, it was true. There had been two attempts on my life since Deane's arrest. The first had been a tiger released in Kenneth's office. I thought at first it was Big Martin catching up with me--but it wasn't. Bradshaw had dealt with the creature; he sent it on a one-way trip to *Zenobians*. The second had been a contract killing. Fortunately for me, Heep's handwriting was pretty poor and Thursby from *The Maltese Falcon* was shot instead. It was only because I was an Outlander that I was still alive--if I'd been a Generic, Text Grand Central could have erased me at source long ago.

"Mr. Tweed said that Outlanders have to stick together," carried on Heep, "and look after each other. Outlanders have a duty--"

"This is all really very sweet of him," I interrupted, "but I can look after myself. Good luck with your award; I'm sure you'll win."

"Thank you!" he said, fidgeting for a moment before moving off a little way and continuing to stare at me in an unsubtle manner.

I was summoned towards the stage where I could see the master of ceremonies winding up the previous award. He reminded me of Adrian Lush--all smiles, insincerity and bouffant hair.

"So," he carried on, " 'teleportation' a clear winner for the Most Implausible Premise in an SF Novel, which was hard luck on 'And they lived happily after,' which won last year. If I could thank all the nominees and especially Ginger Hebblethwaite for presenting it."

There was applause; a freckled youth in a flying jacket waved to the crowd and winked at me as he trotted offstage.

The emcee took a deep breath and consulted his list. Unlike

awards at home, there was no TV coverage as no one in the BookWorld had a TV. You didn't need one. The Generics who had remained in the books as a skeleton staff to keep the stories in order were kept up-to-date with a live footnoterphone link from the Starlight Room. With all the usual characters away at the awards, fiction wasn't *quite* so good, but no one generally noticed. This was often the reason people in the Outland argued over the quality of a recommended book. They had read it during the Bookies.

"The next award, ladies, gentleman and, er, *things*, is to be given by the newest Jurisdiction agent to join the ranks of the BookWorld's own policing agency. Fresh from a glittering career in the Outland and engineer of the improved ending to *Jane Eyre*, may I present--Thursday Next!"

There was applause and I walked on, smiling dutifully. I shook the hand of the emcee and looked out into the auditorium.

It was vast. *Really* vast. The Starlight Room was the largest single-function room ever described in any book. A lit candelabra graced each of the hundred thousand tables, and as I looked into the room, all I could see was a never-ending field of white lights, flickering in the distance like stars. Seven million characters were here tonight, but by using a convenient temporal-field displacement technology borrowed from the boys in the SF genre, everyone in the room had a table right next to the stage and could hear and see us with no problems at all.

"Good evening," I said, staring out at the sea of faces, "I am here to read the nominations and announce the winner of the Best Chapter Opening in the English Language category."

I started to feel hot under the lights. I composed myself and read the back of the envelope.

"The nominations are *The Fall of the House of Usher* by Edgar Allan Poe, *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh, and *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens."

I waited until the applause had died down and then opened the envelope.

"And the winner is . . . *Brideshead Revisited*!"

There was thunderous applause and I smiled dutifully as the



emcee bent closer to the microphone.

"Wonderful!" he said enthusiastically as the applause subsided. "Let's hear the winning paragraph, shall we?"

He placed the short section of writing into the Imagino TransferenceDevice that had been installed on the stage. But this wasn't a recording ITD like the ones they used to create books in the Well--it was a transmitter. The words of Waugh's story were read by the machine and projected directly into the crowd's imagination.

"... I have been here before," I said; I had been there before; first with Sebastian more than twenty years ago on a cloudless day in June, when the ditches were creamy with meadowsweet and the air heavy with the scents of summer; it was a day of peculiar splendour, and although I had been there so often, in so many moods, it was to that first visit that my heart returned on this, my latest..."

There was more applause from the guests, and when finally it stopped, the emcee announced, "Mr. Waugh can't be with us tonight, so I would like to ask Sebastian to accept the award on his behalf."

There was a drumroll and a brief alarum of music as Sebastian walked from his table, up the steps to the podium and after kissing me on the cheek shook the emcee's hand warmly.

"Goodness!" he said, taking a swig from the glass he had brought with him. "It's a great honor to accept the award on behalf of Mr. Waugh. I know he would want me to thank Charles, from whose mouth all the words spring, and also Lord Marchmain for his excellent death scene, my mother, of course, and Julia, Cords--"

"What about me?" said a small voice from the *Brideshead* table.

"I was getting to you, Aloysius." Sebastian cleared his throat and took another swig. "Of course, I would also like to say that we in *Brideshead* could not have done it all on our own. I'd like to thank all the other characters in previous works who have done so much to lay the groundwork. I'd particularly like to mention Captain Grimes, Margot Metroland, and Lord Copper. In addition..."

He droned on like this for almost twenty minutes, thanking everyone he could think of before finally taking the Bookie statuette and returning to his table. I was thanked by the emcee and walked off the stage feeling really quite relieved, the voice of the emcee echoing behind me:

"And for the next category, Most Incomprehensible Plot in Any Genre, we are very pleased to welcome someone who has kindly taken a few hours' leave of his grueling schedule of sadistic galactic domination. Ladies, gentlemen and things, his Supreme Holiness Emperor Zhark!"

"You're on," I whispered to the emperor, who was trying to calm his nerves with a quick cigarette in the wings.

"How do I look? Enough to strike terror into the hearts of millions of merciless life-forms?"

"Terrifying. Have you got the envelope?"

He patted his thick black cloak until he found it and held it up, gave a wan smile, took a deep breath and strode purposefully onto the stage to screams of terror and boos.

I reentered the Starlight Room as the Most Incomprehensible Plot was awarded for the fifth year running to *The Magus*. I glanced at my watch. There was an hour to go until the last and most prestigious award was due to be announced--the Most Troubled Romantic Lead (Male). It was a hot contest and the odds had been fluctuating all day. Heathcliff was the clear favorite at 7-2. He had won it seventy-seven times in a row, and ever conscious of someone trying to steal his thunder, he had been altering his words and actions subtly to keep the crown firmly on his head, something the opposition had also been attempting. Jude Fawley had been trying to spike his own plot to add drama, and even Hamlet was not averse to a subtle amount of plot-shifting; he had hammed up his madness so much he had to be sent on a cruise to calm him down.

I passed a table populated entirely by rabbits.

"Waiter!" called one of them, thumping his rear paw to get attention. "More dandelion leaves for table eight, if you please, sir!"

"Good evening, Miss Next."

It was the Bradshaws; I was glad to see that they had not

been swayed by convention--Mrs. Bradshaw had decided to attend after all.

"Good evening, Commander, good evening, Mrs. Bradshaw--nice dress you're wearing."

"Do you think so?" asked Mrs. Bradshaw slightly nervously. "Trafford wanted me to wear something full length, but I think this little Coco Chanel cocktail number is rather fetching, don't you?"

"Black suits your eyes," I told her, and she smiled demurely.

"I've got the *thing* you wanted me to keep for you," whispered Bradshaw under his breath. "Appreciate a girl who knows how to delegate--say the word and it's yours!"

"I'm waiting for the announcement of Ultra Word™," I hissed. "Tweed is on my back; don't let him get it no matter what!"

"Don't worry your little head about *that*," he said, nodding towards Mrs. Bradshaw. "The memsahib's in the loop--she may look a delicate thing, but by Saint George she's a fearful lass when riled."

He gave me a wink and I moved on, heart pounding. I hoped the nervousness didn't show. Heep was on the stage, but Legree had taken his place and was keeping a surreptitious eye on me from seven hundred tables away--the temporal-field displacement technology worked in his favor--every table was next to every other.

All of a sudden there was a strong smell of beer.

"Miss Next!"

"Sir John, good evening."

Falstaff looked me up and down. I didn't wear a dress that often and I crossed my arms defensively.

"Resplendent, my dear, resplendent!" he exclaimed, pretending to be something of an expert.

"Thank you."

Usually I avoided Falstaff, but if I was being watched, it made sense to talk to as many people as possible; if Tweed and TGC thought I could throw a spanner in the works, I would not help them by drawing attention to my genuine confederates.

"I know of a side room, Mistress Next, a small place of an

acquainting manner--a *niche d'amour*. What say you and I retire to that place where you might learn there how I came by the name 'Falstaff.' "

"Another time."

"Really?" he asked, surprised by my--albeit accidental--acquiescence.

"No, not really, Sir John," I said hurriedly.

"Phew!" he said, mopping his brow. " 'T'would not be half the sport if you were to lie with me--resistance, Mistress Next, is rich allurements indeed!"

"If resistance is all you seek," I told him, smiling, "then you will never have a keener woman to woo!"

"I'll drink to that!" He laughed heartily--the word might have been written for him.

"I have to leave you, Sir John, no more than a gallon of beer an hour, remember?"

I patted his large tum, which was as hard and unyielding as a beer barrel.

"On my word!" he replied, wiping the froth from his beard.

I reached the Jurisdiction table. Beatrice and Benedict were arguing, as usual.

"Ah!" said Benedict as soon as I sat down. " 'Tis beauty that dost oft make women proud, but God he knows Beatrice's share thereof is small!"

"How so?" replied Beatrice. "That face of yours that hungry cannibals would not have touch'd!"

"Have either of you seen the Bellman?" I asked.

They said they hadn't and I left them to their arguing as Foyle sat down next to me. I had seen him at Norland Park from time to time. He was Jurisdiction, too.

"Hello, we haven't been introduced. Gully Foyle is my name, terra is my nation; deep space is my dwelling place and death's my destination--I police Science Fiction."

I shook his hand. "Thursday Next. Call me Thursday. How are you liking the awards?"

"Pretty good. I was disappointed that Hamlet won the Shakespearean Character You'd Most Like to Slap Award--my money was on Othello."

"Well, Othello won Dopiestic Shakespearean Lead, and they

don't like them to win more than one each."

"Is that how it works?" Foyle mused. "The voting system makes no sense to me."

"They say you'll be partnered at Jurisfiction with Emperor Zhark," I said, more by way of conversation than anything else.

"I hope not. We've been trying to raise the intellectual and philosophical status of science fiction for some time now; people like him don't help the cause one iota."

"Why's that?"

"Well," mused Foyle, "how can I put it? Zhark belongs to what we describe as Lesser Science Fiction or Winsome or maybe even Classic."

"How about crap?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

There was a burst of applause as the emcee announced the next award.

"Ladies, gentlemen and things," he declared, "we had asked Dorothy to present the next award, but she was, sadly, kidnapped by flying monkeys just before the show. I will therefore read the nominations myself."

The emcee sighed. Dorothy's absence was just the latest in a number of small problems that usually interrupted the smooth running of the show. Earlier, Rumpelstiltskin had gone berserk and attacked someone who guessed his name, Mary Elliot from *Persuasion* had declared herself "too unwell" to collect the Most Tiresome Austen Character Award, and Boo Radley couldn't be persuaded to come out of his dressing room.

"So," carried on the emcee, "the nominations for the Best Dead Person in Fiction Award are as follows." He looked at the back of the envelope. "First nomination: Count Dracula."

There was a brief burst of applause, mixed with a few jeers.

"Yes, indeed," exclaimed the emcee, "the supreme Dark Lord himself, father of an entire subgenre. From his castle in the Carpathians he embarked upon the world and darkened shadows forever. Let's read a little bit."

He placed a short extract under the ImaginoTransferenceDevice and I felt a cold shadow on my neck as the Dark Lord's description entered my imagination.

There, in one of the great boxes, of which there were fifty in all, on a pile of newly dug earth, lay the Count! He was either dead or asleep, I could not say which--for the eyes were open and stony, but without the glassiness of death--and the cheeks had the warmth of life through all their pallor, and the lips were as red as ever. But there was no sign of movement, no pulse, no breath, no beating of the heart. I bent over him, to find any sign of life, but in vain . . .

There was applause and the lights came up again.

"From the undead to the very dead, the second nomination is for a man who returns selflessly from the grave to warn his erstwhile business partner the terrors which await him if he does not change his ways. All the way from *A Christmas Carol*--Jacob Marley!"

The same face: the very same. Marley in his pigtail, usual waistcoat, tights and boots; the tassels on the latter bristling, like his pigtail, and his coat-skirts, and the hair upon his head. The chain he drew was clasped about his middle. It was long, and wound about him like a tail; and it was made (for Scrooge observed it closely) of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel. His body was transparent; so that Scrooge, observing him, and looking through his waistcoat, could see the two buttons on his coat behind . . .

I glanced across at Marley at the *Christmas Carol* table. Through his semitransparent form I could see Scrooge pulling a large Christmas cracker with Tiny Tim.

When the applause died down, the emcee announced the third nomination:

"Banquo's ghost from *Macbeth*. A slain friend and bloody revenge are on the menu in this Scottish play of power and obsession in the eleventh century. Is Macbeth the master of his own destiny, or the other way round? Let's have a look."

*Enter Ghost.*

MACBETH

Avaunt, and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee!  
Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;  
Thou hast no speculation in those eyes  
Which thou dost glare with.

LADY MACBETH

But as a thing of custom. 'Tis no other,  
Only it spoils the pleasure of the time.

MACBETH

What man dare, I dare.

Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,  
The arm'd rhinoceros, or th' Hyrcan tiger;  
Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves  
Shall never tremble. Or be alive again  
And dare me to the desert with thy sword.  
If trembling I inhabit then, protest me  
The baby of a girl. Hence, horrible shadow!  
Unreal mock'ry, hence!

*Exit Ghost.*

"And the winner is," announced the emcee, opening the envelope, ". . . Count Dracula."

The applause was deafening as the Count walked up to receive his award. He shook hands with the emcee and took the statuette before turning to the audience. He was white and cadaverous and I shivered involuntarily.

"First," said the Count in a soft voice with a slight lisp, "my thanks go to Bram for his admirable reporting of my activities. I would also like to thank Lucy, Mr. Harker and Van Helsing--"

"I hope he's not going to start crying like he did last year," said a voice close to my ear. I turned to find the Cheshire Cat sitting precariously on a seat back. "It's so embarrassing."

But he did. The Count was soon choking back floods of tears, thanking everyone he could think of and generally making a complete fool of himself.

"How are you enjoying the awards?" I said to the Cat, glad to see a friendly face.

"Not bad. I think Orlando was a bit miffed to lose out to Puss in Boots for the Best Talking Cat award."

"My money was on you."

"Was it really?" said the Cat, smiling even more broadly. "You *are* nice. Do you want some advice?"

"Indeed I do." The Cheshire Cat had always remained totally impartial at Jurisfiction. A hundred Bellmans could come and go, but the Cat would always be there--and his knowledge was

vast. I leaned closer.

"Okay," he announced grandly, "here's the advice. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Don't get off a bus while it's still moving."

"That's very good advice," I said slowly. "Thank you very much."

"Don't mention it," said the Cat, and vanished.

"Hello, Thursday."

"Hi, Randolph. How are things?"

"Okay," he said slightly doubtfully. "Have you seen Lola?"

"No."

"Unlike her to miss a party," he muttered. "Do you think she's okay?"

"I think Lola can look after herself. Why are you so interested?"

"I'm going to tell her that I quite like her!" he answered resolutely.

"Why stop there?"

"You mean tell her I *really* like her?"

"And more--but it's a good place to start."

"Thanks. If you see her, tell her I'm on the Unplaced Generics table."

I wished him good luck and he left. I got up and walked to a curtained-off area where several bookies were taking bets. I placed a hundred on Jay Gatsby to win the Most Troubled Romantic Lead (Male) Award. I didn't think he would win; I just wanted Tweed to waste time trying to figure out what I was up to. I joined the *Caversham Heights* table soon afterwards and sat down next to Mary, who had returned for the awards.

"What's going on in the book?" she demanded indignantly. "Jack tells me he's been changing a few things whilst I've been away!"

"Just a few," I said, "but don't worry, we wouldn't write anything embarrassing for you without consultation."

Her eyes flicked across to Arnie, who was sharing a joke with Captain Nemo and Agatha Diesel.

"Just as well," she replied.



The evening drew on, the celebrities announcing the nominations becoming more important as the categories became more highly regarded. Best Romantic Male went to Darcy and Best Female in a Coming-of-Age Book went to Scout Finch. I looked at the clock. Only ten minutes to go before the prestigious Most Troubled Romantic Lead (Male) was due to be announced; the female version of this award had been well represented by Thomas Hardy; Bathsheba Everdene and Tess Durbeyfield had both made it to the nominations only to be pipped at the post by the surprise winner, Lady Macbeth. Sylvia Plath was shortlisted but was disqualified for being real.

I got up and walked to the Jurisdiction table as a drumroll announced the final category. The Bellman nodded politely to me and I looked around the room. It was time to act. UltraWord™ was not the savior of the BookWorld--it would be the end, and I hoped that Mimi down in the footnoterphone conduits was ready.<sup>1</sup>

"And now, ladies, gentlemen and things, for the high point of the evening, the 923rd Annual BookWorld Award for Most Troubled Romantic Lead (Male). To read the nominations we have none other than WordMaster Xavier Libris, all the way from Text Grand Central!"

There was loud applause, which I hadn't expected--TGC wasn't that popular. I had a sudden attack of doubt. Could Deane be wrong? I thought again about Perkins, Snell and Havisham and my resolve returned. I grabbed my bag and got up. I saw Legree stiffen and rise from the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* table, speaking into his cuff as he did so. I headed towards the exit with him tailing me.

"Thank you very much!" said Libris, raising his hands to quell the applause as Hamlet, Jude Fawley and Heathcliff stood close by, each wishing that Libris would hurry up so they could collect the statuette. "I have a few words to say about the new Operating System and then we can all get back to the awards."

He took a deep breath. "Many good words have been written about Ultra Word™, and I have to tell you, they are all true. The benefits to everyone will be felt throughout the BookWorld, from the lowliest D-10 in the trashiest paperback

to the finest A-1 in high literature."

I walked to the side of the stage, towards the swing doors that led through to the hospitality lounge. Legree followed but was tripped up by Mathias's widow. She placed a hoof on his chest and held him firm while Mrs. Hubbard grabbed one arm and Miss Muffet the other. It had been done so quietly no one had noticed.

"Nonfiction is gaining in popularity, and this invasion into areas historically part of fiction must be cut off at the root. To this end, myself and the technicians at Text Grand Central have created Ultra Word™, the Book Operating System that gives us more choice, more plots, more ideas and more ways in which to work. With these tools you and I will forge a new fiction, a fiction so varied that the readers will flock to us in droves. The future is bright--the future is Ultra Word™."

"Going somewhere, missy?" asked Heep, blocking my path.

"Get out of my way, Uriah."

He pulled a gun from his pocket but stopped dead when a voice said:

"Do you know what an eraserhead can do to an A-7 like you, Heep?"

Bradshaw emerged from behind a potted Triffid. He was carrying his trusty hunting rifle.

"You'd *never* kill a featured Dickens character, Mr. Bradshaw!" said Heep, attempting to call his bluff.

Bradshaw pulled back the hammer on his rifle. "Poltroon! Ever wondered what happened to Edwin Drood?"

Heep's eyes nearly popped out of his skull, and coward that he was, he dropped his pistol and started pleading for his life.

Mrs. Bradshaw tied Heep's thumbs together and, after gagging him, hid him under the *Summer Lightning* table.

"Drood?" I asked Bradshaw with some surprise. "Was that you?"

"Not at all!" He laughed. "I only asked him if he had ever *wondered* what happened to Drood. Now get out of here, girly--there's work to be done!"

I pushed the swing doors to the hospitality lounge and pulled out my mobilefootnoterphone. The room was deserted, but I met Tweed at the entrance to the stage. I could see Libris

talking, and beyond him, the audience hanging on his every word.

"Of course," he went on, "the new system will need new work procedures, and all of you have had ample time to study our detailed seventeen-hundred-page prospectus; all jobs will be protected, the status of all Generics will be maintained. In a few minutes I will ask for a vote to carry the new system, as required by the Council of Genres. But before we do, let us go over the main points again. Firstly, UltraWord™ will support the possibility of a 'No Frills' range of books with only forty-three different words, none of them longer than six letters. Designed for the hard-of-reading, these . . ."

I leaned forward and spoke to Tweed as Libris carried on.

"Is that why you invited all the C- and D-class Generics, Tweed?"

"What do you mean?"

"So you could force the vote? Your lies have the greatest effect on those with little influence in the Well--give them the power to change something and they'll meekly follow you. After Libris has finished, I'll give a rebuttal. When I'm done, you and Libris and Ultra Word™ will be history."

Tweed glared at me as Libris went on to his third point. "UltraWord™ is too important to be loused up by you," said Tweed with a sneer. "I agree there might be certain downsides, but overall the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks."

"Benefits to who, Tweed? You and Kaine?"

"Of course. And you, too, if only you'd stop meddling."

"What did Kaine buy you with?"

"He didn't buy me, Next. We *merged*. His contacts in the Outland and my position at Jurisfiction. A fictional person in the real world and a real person in fiction. A better partnership it would be hard to imagine!"

"When they hear what I have to say," I replied calmly, "they'll *never* give you the vote."

Tweed smiled that supercilious smile of his and stepped aside. "You want to have your say, Thursday? Go ahead. Make a fool of yourself. But remember this: Anything you say, we can refute. We can modify the rules, change the facts, deny the truth, with *written proof*. That's the beauty of Ultra

WordTM--everything can be keyed in direct from Text Grand Central, and as you've so correctly gathered, everything there is controlled by Kaine, Libris and I. It's as easy to change the facts as it is to write a stub axle failure on the Bluebird--or unlock a padlock, put Godot in a bag or create an outbreak of misspelling virus. Merely keystrokes, Next. We have the Great Library within our control--with the source text at our fingertips we can do anything. History will be good to us because we are the ones who shall write it!"

Tweed laughed. "Battle against UltraWordTM and you might as well try and canoe up a waterfall."

He patted me patronizingly on the shoulder. "But just in case you've got something up your sleeve, six thousand highly trained Mrs. Danvers are on call, ready to move in on my word. We can even write a BookWorld rebellion if we want--the Council won't be able to tell the difference between a real one and a written one. We *will* have this vote, Thursday."

"Yes, you might," I conceded. "All I want is for the characters to have their say with *all* the facts, not just yours."

I looked at Libris on the stage. "Point ten," he went on as Heathcliff looked at his watch impatiently, "all characters wherever they reside will be given four weeks' holiday a year in whichever book they choose."

There was a roar of applause. He was offering everything they wanted to hear, buying the inhabitants of the BookWorld with hollow promises.

Tweed spoke into his mobilefootnoterphone. "Miss Next wants to have her say."

I saw Libris touch his ear and turn round to stare at me contemptuously.

"But before the vote," he added, "before you say the word and we move upwards into broad, sunlit pastures, I understand we have a Jurisdiction agent who wants to offer a counterpoint to my statement. This is her right. It is *your* right to ask for proof if you wish--and I most strongly request that you do so. Ladies and gentlemen--things--Miss Thursday Next!"

I murmured into my mobilefootnoterphone, "Go, Mimi, go!"<sup>2</sup>

Everyone in the Starlight Room reacted slightly to the distant explosion.

Tweed steadied himself and spun round to glare at me.  
"What was that?"

I patted him patronizingly on the shoulder. "It's called leveling the playing field, Harris."

### 33.

## UltraWord™

**Storycode Engine:** The name given to the imaginotransference machines used by Text Grand Central to throughput the books in the Great Library to the readers in the Outland. On a single machine floor at TGC there are five hundred of these complex, cast-iron colossi. A single engine can cope with up to fifty thousand simultaneous readings of the same book at up to six words per second per reader. With a hundred similar floors, TGC is able to handle two and a half billion different readings, although the lowest ten floors are generally used only when a long-awaited bestseller is published. Using the UltraWord™ system, only twelve engines would be needed to handle the same number of readings--but at speeds of up to twenty words per second.

XAVIER LIBRIS,

*Ultra Word™--the Ultimate Reading Experience*

**H**AMLET AND JUDE Fawley exchanged glances and shrugged their shoulders as I walked up the steps and looked out at the crowd. Heathcliff, to whom all of this was merely delaying his moment of honor, glowered at me angrily. Oddly, I didn't feel at all nervous--only a sort of numb elation. I would do some serious throwing up in the loo later, but for now, I was fine.

"Good evening," I began to the utterly silent audience. "No one would deny that we need more plots, but there are one or two things about Ultra Word™ that you should know."

"Grand Central?!" barked Tweed uselessly into his mobilefootnoterphone. "Tweed to Text Grand Central, come in please!"

I didn't have long. As soon as TGC knew what had happened, they could write themselves another footnoterphone link.

"Firstly, there are no new plots. In all the testing that has been done, not one has been described or hinted at. Libris, would you care to outline a 'new' plot now?"

"They won't be available until Ultra Word™ is on-line," he said, glaring at Tweed, who was still trying to contact Text

Grand Central.

"Then they are untested. Secondly," I went on, "Ultra Word™ carries a thrice-read-only feature."

There was a gasp from the audience.

"This means no more book lending. Libraries will close down overnight, secondhand bookshops will be a thing of the past. Words can educate and liberate--but TGC want to make them a salable commodity and nothing more."

The crowd started to murmur to one another. Not one of those murmurs, which is just a descriptive term, you usually get in the BookWorld, but a *real* murmur--seven million people all discussing what I had just said.

"Orlick!" I heard Tweed shout. "Get to TGC--run if you have to--and get the footnoterphone repaired!"

"This is preposterous!" yelled Libris, almost apoplectic with rage. "Lies, damnable lies!"

"Here," I said, tossing Deane's copy of *The Little Prince* onto the table right at the front. The displacement-field technology worked perfectly--a single book landed on each of the hundred thousand tables.

"This is an UltraWord™ book," I explained. "Read the first page and pass it on. See how long it takes before you can't open it."

"Tweed!?" yelled Libris, who was still next to me on the stage and becoming more agitated by the second. "Do something!"

I pointed at Xavier. "WordMaster Libris could refute my arguments with ease, simply by rewriting the facts. He could have unblocked the book already but for one thing--all the lines are down to Text Grand Central. As soon as they are up again, each of these books will be unblocked. Perkins was murdered when he found out what they were up to. He told Snell and he was killed, too. Miss Havisham didn't know, but TGC *suspected* that she did, so she had to be silenced."

The Bellman had risen to his feet and was walking to the front of the stage. "Is this true?" he asked, eyes blazing.

"No, Your Bellship," replied Libris, "on my honor. As soon as we get back on-line, we will refute every single claim the misinformed Miss Next has made!"

The Bellman looked at me. "Better get a move on, young lady. You have the crowd, but for how long, I have no idea."

"Thirdly and more importantly, all books written using the UltraWord™ system can be fixed direct using the source storycode from Text Grand Central--there will be no need for Jurisdiction. Everything we do can be achieved by low-skilled technicians at TGC."

"Ah!" said Libris, interrupting. "Now we get to your *real* point--fearful of your job, perhaps?"

"Not my job, Libris--my real home is in the Outland. I would applaud a BookWorld in which we had no need of a policing agency--but not one where we lose the Well of Lost Plots!"

There was a gasp from the crowd, seven million people all drawing breath at the same time.

"Under UltraWord™ there will be no need for plotsmiths, echolocators, imaginers, holesmiths, grammatacists and spellcheckers. No need for Generics to be trained because characters will be constructed with the minimum of description necessary to do the job. I'm talking about the wholesale destruction of everything that is intuitive in writing--to be replaced by the formulaic. The Well would be dismantled and run instead by a few technicians at TGC who will construct books with no input from any of you."

"Then what will happen to us?" said a voice from the front.

"Replaced," I said simply, "replaced by a string of nouns and verbs. No hopes, no dreams, no future. No more holidays because you won't need or want one--you will all be reduced to nothing more than words on a page, lifeless as ink and paper."

There was silence.

"Proof!" cried Libris. "All you have demonstrated so far is that you can spin a yarn as good as any plotsmith! Where is your proof?"

"Very well," I said slowly. "Mrs. Bradshaw? The skylark, if you please."

Mrs. Bradshaw produced the small cage from beneath the table and handed it up to me.

"I have seen an UltraWord™ character with my own eyes, and they are empty husks. If an old book is read in Ultra



WordTM, it is very good--but if it is *written* in Ultra WordTM, it will be flat and trite, devoid of feeling--the SmileyBurger of the storytelling world. The Well may be wasteful and long-winded, but every book read in the Outland was built there--even the greats."

I took the skylark from the cage. "This was the proof that Perkins died for."

I placed the small songbird beneath the Imagino TransferenceDevice and the skylark's description was transmitted into the audience.

O Lark so quick of wing,  
Dive down from up on high,  
Perch proud upon the post,  
Melt darkness with thy cry.

Come make my spirits soar,  
Dance here and hover long,  
Tempt summer with your trill,  
Sweet stream of endless song.

The audience reacted favorably to the words and there was a smattering of applause, despite their nervousness.

"What's wrong with that?" insisted Libris. "UltraWordTM takes language and uses it in ways more wonderful than you can imagine!"

The Bellman looked at me. "Miss Next," he demanded, "explain yourself."

"Well," I said slowly, "that *wasn't* an UltraWordTM skylark. I picked it up from the library this morning."

There was an expectant hush as Mrs. Bradshaw produced a *second* bird seemingly identical to the first and handed it up to me.

"This is the Ultra WordTM version. Shall we compare?"

"That's not necessary!" said Libris quickly. "We get the point." He turned to the Bellman. "Sir, we need a few more weeks to sort out a few minor kinks--"

"Go ahead, Thursday," said the Bellman, "let's see how UltraWordTM compares."

I placed the bird in the ITD, and it transmitted the cold and clinical description into the audience.

With a short tail and large wings, a skylark is easily recognized in flight. There is a distinctive streaking pattern to the brown plumage on the breast, and a black-and-white pattern beneath the tail. Nests in hollow on ground. Can sing a bit.

"I call a vote right now!" exclaimed the Bellman, climbing onto the stage.<sup>1</sup>

I looked across at Tweed, who was tapping his mobilefootnoterphone and smiling.

"What's the problem?" I asked.<sup>2</sup>

"Eh?" asked the Bellman.

"The vote!" I urged. "Hurry!"

"Of course," he replied, knowing full well that Text Grand Central were not defeated until the vote had been taken. The Council of Genres weren't involved--but would be if TGC tried to go against a BookWorld referendum. That was something they could *never* rewrite.

"Good!" said Tweed into his mobilefootnoterphone. "Communications have been restored."

He smiled at me and signaled to Libris, who calmed dramatically as only the supremely confident can do.

"Very well," said Libris slowly, "the Bellman has called for a vote, and as the rules state, I am allowed to answer any criticism laid before me."

"A rebuttal of a rebuttal?" I cried. "The rules don't state that!"

"But they do!" said Libris kindly. "Perhaps you'd like to look at the BookWorld constitution?"

He pulled the slim volume from his coat and I could smell the cantaloupes from where I stood. It would say whatever they wanted it to say.

Libris walked over to us and said to the Bellman in a quiet voice, "We can do this the easy way or the hard way. We make the rules, we can change the rules, we can modify the rules. We can do anything we want. You are due to step down. Go with me on this one and you can have an easy retirement. Go against me and I'll crush you."

Libris turned to me. "What do you care? No one in the Outland will notice the difference. You'll have a week to pack up and move out--you have my word on that."

The Bellman glared at Libris. "How much did they pay you?"

"They didn't need to. Money doesn't mean anything down here. No, it's the technology that I really love. It's too perfect to be sidelined by people like you. I get one hundred percent control. Everything will go through TGC. No more Well of Lost Plots, no more Generics, no more Council, no more strikes by disgruntled nursery rhyme workers. But do you know the best bit? No more authors. No more missed deadlines. No more variable-quality second books--each one in the series will be the same as the last. When a publisher needs a bestseller, all they need do is contact our sole representative in the Outland!"

"Yorrick Kaine," I murmured.

"Indeed. It's all for the best, my dear."

Incredibly, it was *worse* than I thought. It was as if the paint factories had decided to deal direct with the art galleries.

"But the books!" I cried. "They'll be terrible!"

"Within a few years no one will notice," replied Libris. "Mr. Bellman, do you go with us on this or not?"

"I would sooner die!" he exclaimed, trembling with rage.

"As you wish," replied Libris.

There was a short crackling noise and I saw the Bellman stiffen slightly.

"Now," said Libris, "let's finish this all up. Bellman, would you refute Miss Next's points one by one?"

"I should be delighted," he said slowly and without emotion. I turned to him in shock and could see how his features were less defined than before--sort of like a wire-framed, three-dimensional model clothed in realistic skintone. I could see it easily but I was up close--the audience hadn't noticed anything at all. The smell of melons once more drifted across the stage.

"Friends!" began the Bellman. "Miss Next is entirely mistaken . . ."

I turned to Libris and he smiled triumphantly. I reached into my bag for my gun, but it had been changed to marmalade.

"Tch, tch," said Libris in a whisper, "that's a BookWorld gun and under *our* control. What a shame you lost your Outlander Browning in the struggle with Tweed!"

I had only one card left. I pulled out my TravelBook and opened it, flicking past the TextMarker and Eject-O-Hat and on

towards the glass panel covering a red-painted handle. A note painted on the glass read, IN UNPRECEDENTED EMERGENCY, BREAK GLASS. If this wasn't an unprecedented emergency, I didn't know what was. I smashed the glass, grabbed the handle and pulled it down with all my strength.

## 34.

### Loose Ends

Contrary to Text Grand Central's claims, there were no new plots using UltraWord™. Ex-WordMaster Libris had become so obsessed with the perfection of his Operating System that nothing else had mattered to him and he lied repeatedly to cover up its failings. BOOK V8.3 remained the Operating System for many years to come, although one of the UltraWord™ copies of *The Little Prince* can be viewed in the Jurisfiction museum. To avoid a repeat of this near disaster, the Council of Genres took the only course of action open to them to ensure TGC would be too inefficient and unimaginative to pose a threat. They appointed a committee to run it.

MILLON DE FLOSS,  
*Ultra Word™--the Aftermath*

IT WAS NEARLY morning when the BookWorld Awards party finished. Heathcliff was furious that in all the excitement the final award of the night had been forgotten; I saw him talking angrily to his personal imaginater an hour after the appearance of the Great Panjandrum. There would be next year of course, but his seventy-seven-year record had been broken and he didn't like it. I thought he might take it out on Linton and Catherine when he got home, and he did.

No one had been more surprised than me by the arrival of the Great Panjandrum when I pulled the emergency handle. For the nonbelievers it was something of a shock, but not any less than for the faithful. She had been so long a figure of speech that seeing her in the flesh was something of a shock. I thought she had seemed quite plain and in her midthirties, but Humpty-Dumpty told me later he had been shaped like an egg. In any event, the marble statue that now stands in the lobby of the Council of Genres depicts the Great Panjandrum as Mr. Price the stonemason saw him--with a leather apron and carrying a mallet and stone chisel.

When she arrived, the Great Panjandrum read the situation perfectly. She froze all the text within the room, locked the doors and decreed that a vote be taken there and then. She

summoned the head of the Council of Genres, and the vote against UltraWord was carried unanimously. She spoke to me three times: once to tell me I had *The Write Stuff*, second to ask me if I would take on the job of the Bellman, and lastly to ask if disco mirror-balls in the Outland had a motor to make them go round or whether they did it by the action of the lights. I answered "Thank you," "Yes" and "I don't know" in that order.

After the party was over, I walked back through the slowly stirring Well of Lost Plots to the shelf that held *Caversham Heights* and read myself back inside, tired but happy. The Bellman's job would, I hoped, keep me busy, but purely in administration--I wouldn't have to go jumping around in books--just the thing to allow my ankles to swell in peace and quiet, and to plan my return to the Outland when the infant Next and its mother were strong enough. Together we would face the tribulations of Landen's return, because the little one *would* have a father, I had promised it that much already. I opened the door to the Sunderland and felt the old flying boat rock slightly as I entered. When I'd first come here, it had unnerved me, but now I wouldn't have had it any other way. Small wavelets slapped against the hull, and somewhere an owl hooted as it returned to roost. It felt as much like home as home had ever done. I kicked off my shoes and flopped on the sofa next to Gran, who had fallen asleep over a sock she was knitting. It was already a good twelve feet long because, she said, she had "yet to build up enough courage to turn the heel."

I closed my eyes for a moment and fell fast asleep without the nagging fear of Aornis, and it was nearly ten the next morning when I awoke. But I didn't wake naturally--Pickwick was tugging at the corner of my dress.

"Not now, Pickers," I mumbled sleepily, trying to turn over and nearly impaling myself on a knitting needle. She carried on tugging until I sat up, rubbed the sleep from my eyes and stretched noisily. She seemed insistent so I followed her upstairs to my bedroom. Sitting on the bed and surrounded by broken eggshell was something that I could only describe as a ball of fluff with two eyes and a beak.

"Plock-plock," said Pickwick.

"You're right," I told her, "she's very beautiful. Congratulations."

The small dodo blinked at us both, opened its beak wide and said, in a shrill voice, "*Plunk!*"

Pickwick started and looked at me anxiously.

"Well!" I told her. "A rebellious teenager already?"

Pickwick nudged the chick with her beak and it *plunked* indignantly before settling down.

I thought for a moment and said, "You aren't going to feed her doing that disgusting regurgitation seabird thing are you?"

The door burst open downstairs.

"Thursday!" yelled Randolph anxiously. "Are you in here?"

"I'm here," I shouted, leaving Pickwick with her offspring and coming downstairs to find a highly agitated Randolph, pacing up and down the living room.

"What's up?"

"It's Lola."

"Some unsuitable young man again? Really, Randolph, you've got to learn not to be so jealous--"

"No," he said quickly, "it's not that. *Girls Make All the Moves* didn't find a publisher and the author burnt the only manuscript in a drunken rage! That's why she wasn't at the awards last night!"

I stopped. If a book had been destroyed in the Outland, then all the characters and situations would be up for salvage--

"Yes," said Randolph, reading my thoughts, "they're going to auction off Lola!"

I quickly changed out of my dress and we arrived as the sale was winding up. Most of the descriptive scenes had already gone, the one-liners packaged and sold as a single lot, and all the cars and most of the wardrobe and furniture were disposed of. I pushed through to the front of the crowd and found Lola looking dejected, sitting on her suitcase.

"Lola!" said Randolph, as they hugged. "I brought Thursday to help you!"

She jumped up and smiled, but it was a despairing half smile at best and it spoke volumes.

"Come on," I said, grabbing her by the hand, "we're out of

here."

"Not so fast!" said a tall man in an immaculate suit. "No goods are to be removed until paid for!"

"She's with me," I told him as several hulking great bouncers appeared from nowhere.

"No, she's not. She's lot ninety-seven. You can bid if you want to."

"I'm Thursday Next, the Bellman-elect, and Lola is with me."

"I know who you are and you did good, but I have a business to run. I haven't done anything wrong. You can take the Generic home with you in ten minutes--*after* you have won the bidding."

I glared at him. "I'm going to close down this foul trade and enjoy it every step of the way!"

"Really? I'm quaking in my boots. Now, are you going to bid or do I withdraw the lot and put it up for private tender?"

"She's not an *it*," snarled Randolph angrily, "she's a Lola--and I love her!"

"You're breaking my heart. Bid or bugger off, the choice is yours."

Randolph made to plant a punch on the dealer's chin, but he was caught by one of the bouncers and held tightly.

"Control your Generic or I'll throw you both out! Get it?"

Randolph nodded and he was released. We stood together at the front watching Lola, who was weeping silently into her handkerchief.

"Gentlemen. Lot ninety-seven. Fine female B-3 Generic, ident: TSI-1404912-A, attractive and personable. An opportunity to secure this sort of highly entertaining and pneumatic young lady does not come often. Her high appetite for sexual congress, slight dopiness and winsome innocence mated to indefatigable energy makes her especially suitable for 'racy' novels. What am I bid?"

It was bad. *Very* bad. I turned to Randolph. "Do you have any money?"

"About a tenner."

The bidding had already reached a thousand. I didn't have a tenth of that either here or back home--nor anything to sell to raise such a sum. The bidding rose higher, and Lola grew more



depressed. For the amount that was being bid, she was probably in for a series of books--and the movie rights. I shuddered.

"With you, sir, at six thousand!" announced the auctioneer as the bidding bounced backwards and forwards between two well-known dealers. "Any more bids?"

"Seven thousand!"

"Eight!"

"Nine!"

"I can't watch," said Randolph, tears streaming down his face. He turned and left as Lola stared after him, trying to see him as he pushed his way to the back.

"Any more bids?" asked the auctioneer. "With you, sir, at nine thousand . . . going once . . . going twice . . ."

"*I bid one original idea!*" I shouted, digging in my bag for the small nugget of originality and marching up to the auctioneer's table. There was a deathly hush as I held the glowing fragment aloft, then placed it on his desk with a flourish.

"A nugget of originality for a trollop like that?" muttered a man at the front. "The Bellman-elect's got a screw loose."

"Lola is that important to me," I said somberly. Miss Havisham had told me to use the nugget wisely--I think I did.

"Is it enough?"

"It's enough," said the vendor, picking up the nugget and staring at it avariciously through an eyeglass. "This lot is withdrawn from the sale. Miss Next, you are the proud owner of a Generic."

Lola nearly wet herself, poor girl, and she hugged me tightly during the five minutes it took to complete the paperwork.

We found Randolph sitting on a bollard down by the docks, staring off into the Text Sea with a sad and vacant look in his eyes. Lola leaned down and whispered in his ear.

Randolph jumped and turned round, flung his arms around her and cried for joy.

"Yes," he said, "yes, I did mean it! Every bit of it!"

"Come on, lovebirds," I told them, "I think it's time to leave this cattle market."

We walked back to *Caversham Heights*, Randolph and Lola

holding hands, making plans to start a home for Generics who had fallen on hard times, and trying to think up ways to raise funding. Neither of them had the resources to undertake such a project, but it got me thinking.

The following week and soon after the Bellman inauguration, I gave my proposal to the Council of Genres--*Caversham Heights* should be bought by the Council and used as a sanctuary for characters who needed a break from the sometimes arduous and repetitive course that fictional people are forced to tread. A sort of textual summer camp. To my delight the Council approved the measure, as it had the added bonus of a solution to the nursery rhyme problem. Jack Spratt was overjoyed at the news and didn't seem in the least put out by the massive changes that would be necessary to embrace the visitors.

"The drug plot is out, I'm afraid," I told him as we discussed it over lunch a few days later.

"What the hell," he exclaimed, "I was never in love with it anyway. Do we have a replacement boxer?"

"The boxing plot is out, too."

"Ah. How about the money-laundering subplot where I discover the mayor has been taking kickbacks? That's still in, yes?"

"Not . . . as such," I said slowly.

"It's gone, too? Do we even have a murder?"

"*That* we have." I passed him the new outline I had been thrashing out with a freelance imaginator the previous day.

"Ah!" he said, scanning the words eagerly. "It's Easter in Reading--a bad time for eggs--and Humpty-Dumpty is found shattered beneath a wall in a shabby area of town. . . ."

He flicked a few more pages. "What about Dr. Singh, Madeleine, Unidentified Police Officers 1 and 2 and all the others?"

"All still there. We've had to reassign a few parts, but it should hold together. The only person who wouldn't move was Agatha Diesel--I think she might give you a few problems."

"I can handle her," replied Jack, flicking to the back of the outline to see how it all turned out. "Looks good to me. What do the nurseries say about it?"

"I'm talking to them next."

I left Jack with the outline and jumped to Norland Park, where I took the news to Humpty-Dumpty; he and his army of pickets were still camped outside the doors of the house--they had been joined by characters from nursery stories, too.

"Ah!" said Humpty as I approached. "The Bellman. The three witches were right after all."

"They generally are," I replied. "I have a proposal for you."

Humpty's eyes grew bigger and bigger as I explained what I had in mind.

"Sanctuary?" he asked.

"Of sorts," I told him. "I'll need you to coordinate all the nurseries who will find narrative a little bit alien after doing couplets for so long, so you'll be dead when the story opens."

"Not . . . the *wall* thing?"

"I'm afraid so. What do you think?"

"Well," said Humpty, reading the outline carefully and smiling, "I'll take it to the membership, but I think I can safely say that there is nothing here that we can find any great issue with. Pending a ballot, I think you've got yourself a deal."

It took the C of G almost a year to scrap the pristine and unused Ultra Word engines, and many more arrests followed, although sadly, none in the Outland. Vernham Deane was released, and he and Mimi were awarded the Gold Star for Reading as well as the plot realignment they had wanted for so many years. They married and--quite unprecedented for a Farquitt baddy--lived happily ever after, something that caused a severe drop in sales for *The Squire of High Potternews*. Harris Tweed, Xavier Libris and twenty-four others at Text Grand Central were tried and found guilty of "crimes against the BookWorld." Harris Tweed was expelled permanently from fiction and returned to Swindon. Heep, Orlick and Legree were all sent back to their books, and the rest were reduced to text.

It was the first day of the influx of nursery rhyme refugees, and Lola and I were sitting on a park bench in *Caversham Heights*--soon to be renamed *Nursery Crime*. We were watching

Humpty-Dumpty welcome the long line of guests as Randolph allocated parts. Everyone was happy with the arrangements, but I wasn't overwhelmed with joy myself. I still missed Landen and I was reminded of this every time I tried--and failed--to get my old trousers to button up over my rapidly expanding waistline.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Landen."

"Oh," said Lola, staring at me with her big brown eyes. "You will get him back, I am sure of it--please don't be downhearted!"

I patted her hand and thanked her for her kind words.

"I never did say thank you for what you did," she said slowly. "I missed Randolph more than anything--if only he'd told me what he felt I would have stayed in *Heights* or sought a dual placement--even as a C-grade."

"Men are like that. I'm just glad you're both happy."

"I'll miss being the main protagonist," she said wistfully. "*Girls Make All the Moves* was a good role but in a crap book. Do you think I'll ever be the heroine again?"

"Well, Lola, some would say that the hero of any story is the one who changes the most. If we take the moment when we first met as the beginning of the story and right now as the end, I think that makes you and Randolph the heroes by a long straw."

"It does, doesn't it?"

She smiled and we sat in silence for a moment.

"Thursday?"

"Yes?"

"So who did kill Godot?"

## 34a.

### Heavy Weather

(Bonus chapter exclusive to the U.S. edition)

**BookWorld Meteorology:** Aside from the rain, snow and wind that often feature within the pages of novels for dramatic effect, another weather system works within the BookWorld; a sort of transgenre wind that is not a moving mass of air but one of text, sense distortion and snippets of ideas. It is usually only a mild zephyr whose welcome breeze brings with it a useful cross-fertilization of ideas within the genres and usually has no greater vice than the spread of the mispeling virus. On occasion, however, the wind has been known to whip itself up into a WordStorm that can dislodge whole sentences and plot devices and deposit them several genres away. It's not a common phenomenon, but it's wise to keep an eye on it. In my second week as Bellman, a WordStorm of unprecedented ferocity hit the library. It was the first real test of my Bellmanship. I think I did okay.

THURSDAY NEXT,  
*Private Diaries*

I WAS ASLEEP IN my room in the Sunderland not long after my inauguration as Bellman. Everything had been pretty quiet that week. A few PageRunners and a sighting of the Minotaur, but nothing too serious. Text Grand Central was still coming to grips with the new management regime, and all the storycode engines had been shut down and rebooted to rid them of the UltraWord Operating System. So a lull was not only welcome, but necessary.

I was awoken from my slumber by a loud purring and was shocked to find the Cat formerly known as Cheshire about an inch from my nose.

"Hullo!" he purred, grinning fit to burst. "Were you dreaming about oysters?"

"No," I confessed. "In fact," I added, rubbing my eyes and attempting to sit up, "I don't think I've *ever* dreamt about oysters."

"Really? I dream about them all the time. Sometimes on the half shell and other times in an oyster bed. Sometimes I dream

about them playing the piano."

"How can an oyster play the piano?"

"No, *I* dream about them when *I'm* playing the piano."

I looked at the clock. It was three in the morning.

"Did you wake me up to tell me about your oyster dreams?"

"Not at all. I can't think for a moment why you are interested. Something has come up over at Text Grand Central and we thought you should be informed."

I was suddenly a great deal wider awake. I moved to get up and the Cat politely faded from view as I stepped from the bed.

"So what's up?" I asked, slipping on a T-shirt.

"It's the TextWind," said the Cat from the corridor. "We've been monitoring it all day and there is a possibility it could whip itself up into a WordStorm."

Weather inside fiction is much like weather at home, only usually more extreme. Book rain generally comes down in stair rods, and book snow always has flakes the size of farthings. But these all exist *within* books for narrative purposes. The BookWorld itself has less easily recognized weather patterns but has them, just the same--a particularly bad storm in '34 swept through Horror and rained detritus on Drama for weeks, the most notable result being the grisly spontaneous-combustion sequence in Dickens's *Bleak House*.

I pulled on my trousers and shoes and walked out of the door, leaving Pickwick and her chick asleep in an untidy snoring mass on the rug. The Cat was waiting for me and together we jumped to Text Grand Central.

TGC was the technical nerve center of the BookWorld. Modified from an unpublished Gothic horror novel, the one hundred floors of TGC were lit by flickering gas mantles that only faintly illuminated the vaulted ceilings high above the polished marble floors. We entered near the corner of floor sixty-nine and I followed the Cat as we walked past the humming storycode engines, each one a colossi of cast iron, shiny brass and polished mahogany. Just one of five hundred on this floor alone, the bus-sized machine could cope with up to fifty thousand simultaneous readings of the same book--or one reading apiece of fifty thousand different books, as

demand saw fit. I had only visited TGC once before as part of my induction to the Bellman's job and was amazed not only on how impossible the concept was to my flat Outlander mind, but the supreme scale of it all. The technicians scurried like tireless ants over the clanking machinery, checking dials, oiling moving parts and venting steam while keeping a close lookout for any narrative anomalies to report to the collators upstairs. It was from these collators that reports of Fiction Infractions, PageRunners and all the other BookWorld misdemeanors filtered through to us at the Jurisfiction offices. The whole system was hopelessly antiquated and manpower intensive--but it worked.

We left the engine floor and walked into a large anteroom where the BookWorld Meteorological Department worked. It was here the ten-strong team spent their days busily searching for patterns in the seemingly random textual anomalies that occur throughout fiction. The department was run by Dr. Howard. I had met him briefly once before and knew that a century or two ago he had been real, like me. TGC had commissioned a biography of the original Luke Howard solely so a Generic could be trained and then employed part-time in this office.

"Ah!" he said as we walked in. "Glad you're here, Bellman. Heavy weather moving in from the Western genre. This is Senator Jobsworth from the Council of Genres, here as part of the C of G committee for observation of anomalies."

Jobsworth, a small and weedy-looking man, didn't look comfortable nor regal in his senatorial robes. As part of the regime change after the Ultra Word debacle, it was deemed that a senator should be present at any unusual event. He looked shiftier and I took an instant dislike to him.

"Senator," I said, bowing slightly as protocol dictated.

"Miss Next," he said dryly, "I must tell you right now that I didn't vote for you. I will be keeping a close eye on your behavior."

"Good," I replied noncommittally, then added, "What's up, Dr. Howard?"

He motioned us towards the center of the room where beneath us in a recessed pit there was a large map of the

BookWorld.

"We plot everything," he explained as the staff below moved marker tags with long sticks to the orders of the controllers above, "from the largest unconstrained narrative flexation to the smallest tense distortion. Then, by plotting the size of the changes and their positions, a rough map of the BookWorld's weather can be constructed."

I looked down at the sea of small markers, which seemed, indeed, to have a sort of swirling pattern to them. He pointed to a mass of reports.

"About two hours ago an outbreak of anomalous plot flexations began in *Riders of the Purple Sage*."

"The Minotaur was reported in Zane Grey last week," I commented.

"That's what we thought at first," replied Dr. Howard, "but the slight flexations were moving too fast to be a PageRunner. Within twenty minutes a cloud of grammatical oddities had joined the weather front, and together they left the Western genre. The front brushed the southeast corner of Erotica and vanished ten minutes later into Stream of Consciousness."

"Vanished?"

"Difficult to spot, perhaps. It's been quiet in SOC ever since. But that's not all. At pretty much the same time a cloud of mispunctuation arose in Horror, circled twice and then developed into a pretty stiff breeze of split infinitives and jumbled words before traveling through Fantasy into Romance. Unchallenged, it hit the Farquitt series and split in two. One storm front headed north into Steel, the other along the Collins ridge just east of Krantz. We expect the two fronts to merge just past Cooper in a few minutes."

"So we can safely say it's over then?" asked the senator, staring at the plotting table with more than a little confusion.

"Up to a point, Senator," replied Dr. Howard diplomatically. "As you so expertly point out, it just *might* dissipate into the Taylor Bradford canon harmlessly."

"Oh, good!" said the senator with relief.

"However," continued Dr. Howard, "and far be it from me to contradict Your Grace, it's equally probable they will strengthen and then careen off on a destructive course towards



Drama."

"Boss!" said a technician who had been staring at a list of recent anomalies. "I think you better see this."

Below us on the plotting table we could see a small bulge emerge on the western flanks of Stream of Consciousness.

"How fast?" asked Dr. Howard.

"About three pages a second."

"Give me a projected route."

The technician picked up a slide rule and scribbled some notes on a pad of paper. Unluckily for us, the front that had begun in Western had traversed Stream of Consciousness and emerged four times as strong.

"I knew we hadn't seen the last of it," muttered Howard. "Damn and blast!"

But that wasn't all. In the next two minutes we watched nervously as the split storm fronts coursing through Romance rejoined, grew stronger and diverted off towards Drama, as feared.

"And that's why we called you," said Dr. Howard, gazing at me intently. "In under ten minutes the Romance and Stream of Consciousness frontal systems will merge and strengthen. We've got a WordStorm brewing of magnitude five-point-four or more heading straight for Drama."

"Five-point-four?" echoed the senator. "That's good, right?"

"In storm terms, it's very good," replied Dr. Howard grimly, "make no mistake about that. A two-point-three might only scramble text and change tenses; a three-point-five can muddle chapters and remove entire words. Anything above a five has enough power to tear whole ideas and paragraphs out of a book and dump them several shelves away."

"O-kay," I said slowly as Commander Bradshaw appeared, looking a bit bleary-eyed.

"Glad you could make it, Trafford. We've got a potential WordStorm brewing."

"WordStorm, eh?" he mused. "Reminds me of a typhoon that struck *The French Lieutenant's Woman* ten years back. By gad, we were picking superfluous adjectives out of the book for a month!"

"And that had been a small one," added Dr. Howard, "barely

a two-point-one."

"Cat," I said, "issue a storm warning to the residents of all books on the storm's path. Trafford, we need every single Danver-Clone we have on thirty-second readiness. I want textual sieves ready and standing by."

"Well," said Senator Jobsworth, "this is all quite exciting, isn't it? And what is a textual sieve, anyway?"

We all ignored him and moved to a table in Dr. Howard's office where one of his team had unrolled a more detailed map of the threatened area of Drama. It was essentially one of Bradshaw's booksporing charts overlaid with the footnoterphone conduits in red ink. The map looked like a giant spiderweb of interconnections, the books that remained unexplored standing alone and unprotected. If we couldn't get in to warn them, they certainly wouldn't be able to see it coming.

We waited patiently as the minutes ticked by, the plotters updating the course of the two storm fronts on the chart as they merged, gathered speed and hurtled across the emptiness of intergenre space, directly towards Drama. Bradshaw had relayed my orders to the DanverClones; all we needed was the title of the books most likely to be hit by the coming storm.

"Why don't we set up those textual sieves across this area here?" suggested Senator Jobsworth, waving a hand at the chart.

"We mustn't spread our sieves too thin," I explained. "We need them concentrated at the place the storm hits to do any good at all."

As if to confirm its waywardness, the storm changed direction. It had been heading almost straight for the Satire end of Drama when it veered away and headed instead for Novel.

"Which one do you think, old girl?" asked Bradshaw, footnoterphone in hand. It was one of those moments where leadership has a lonely, hollow emptiness to it. The wrong decision now and we could be mopping up the mess for years. Give my order too early and the storm might veer again and cut an ugly swath through Trollope; give the order too late and the textual sieves might not be up in time to stop the

storm in its tracks. A half-unfurled sieve would be broken like matchwood and carried with the storm to who knows where.

"What shall we do, Bellman?" asked the Cat. He wasn't smiling.

A technician updated the plot. The storm had moved slightly to the west and was now four minutes from hitting Drama. Would it hold that course or veer off again?

"Dr. Howard," I said, "I need your best estimate."

"It's almost impossible to say--!"

"I know that!" I snapped. "Like it or not, you are the best guesser and I'm going to go with your hunch--that's my decision. Now, where do you think it will hit?"

He sighed resignedly and stabbed a finger on the map. "I think about here. Page two hundred fourteen of *The Scarlet Letter*, give or take a chapter or two."

"Hawthorne," I murmured, "not good."

No one had ever traveled into any of his books before, so the DanverClones would be working on the books closest to it--never a satisfactory alternative.

"Right," I said, drawing a deep breath, "do we have an updated report on the size of this WordStorm?"

"It's now a five-point-seven," replied the technician in a voice tinged with fear, "and it's heavy with ideas and plot devices picked up on its journey so far."

"Compact?"

"I'd say," replied the technician, reading the latest weather report, "barely three paragraphs wide but with a density over six-point-four. It's currently moving at eight pages a second."

"It could tear a hole straight through *The Scarlet Letter* at that rate," exploded Bradshaw, "and litter the whole book with dramatic events!"

The consequence of this was terrible to consider--a new version of *The Scarlet Letter* where things actually happen.

"Impact time?"

"Three minutes."

I had an idea. "How many people are reading *Scarlet Letter* at present?"

"Six hundred and twenty-two," replied the Cat, who as librarian had these figures at his paws twenty-four hours a

day.

"Pleasure readers?"

"Mostly," replied the Cat, thinking hard, "except for a class of thirty-two English students at Frobisher High School in Michigan who are studying it."

"Good. Bradshaw? I want you to set up textual sieves in every book ever written by Hemingway--even the bad ones. Sieves are to be set to *coarse* in all short stories, letters, *Winner Take Nothing* and *In Our Time*, *medium* in *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Green Hills of Africa*. I want to channel the storm, slowing it down as it passes. By *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, sieves should be set to *fine*. The storm will bounce between all the works, moving west towards the void between Hemingway and Fitzgerald. If it makes it that far, we'll reset the sieves and attack it again."

There was a pause.

"But, Thursday," said Bradshaw slowly, "the storm isn't going to hit Hemingway."

"It will if we shut *The Scarlet Letter* down."

"Out of the question!" exploded Senator Jobsworth, spontaneously and automatically rejecting any possible infringements of his sacred regulations. "The rules do not permit any book to be shut down without a vote at the Council of Genres--I can quote the rule number if you wish!"

Technically, he was right. Even with a vote, nobody had tried anything so audacious before. It usually took an hour to shut down a book, more to bring it up to full readability again.

"Is that wise?" asked Dr. Howard.

"Not in the least," I replied, "but I'm out of time and ideas right now."

"Isn't anyone listening to me?" continued the senator, more outraged at our lack of respect than at losing *The Scarlet Letter*.

"Oh, we're listening all right," purred the Cat, "we just don't agree with you."

"Rules are there for a good reason, Miss Next. We have ordered the demolition of bigger books than *The Scarlet Letter*. I personally--"

"Listen," I said, "classics have been lost before but never during my tenure as Bellman. Tomorrow morning you can

have my badge if I'm wrong and send me packing. Right now you can sit down and shut up. Cat and Bradshaw, are you with me on this?"

"Appreciate a woman who can make bold decisions!" muttered Bradshaw, repeating my orders to the DanverClones. Senator Jobsworth had gone red with impotent fury, and his mouth was twitching as he sought to find words to adequately express his anger at my insubordination.

"Two minutes to impact."

I picked up the footnoterphone and asked to be put through to the storycode engine floor.

"Bradshaw, I want you to take a trip to the Outland and set the fire alarm off at Frobisher High in exactly seventy-eight seconds. That will give us a few minutes breathing space. The pleasure readers will just think they've got bored and lost concentration when the book shuts down. Hello, storycode floor? This is the Bellman. I want you to divert Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* to an empty storycode engine and shut it down. . . . Yes, that's quite correct. Shut it down. I don't have time to issue a written order so you're going to have to take my word for it. You are to do it in exactly sixty-three seconds."

"Sieves are going up as requested, Thursday," reported Bradshaw. "Think they'll hold?"

I shrugged. There was nothing else we could do. The storm plot ran towards *The Scarlet Letter* and struck it just as the storycode engine shut down. The book closed. The characters stopped in their tracks as an all-pervading darkness swept over every descriptive passage, every line of dialogue, every nuance, every concept. Where a moment ago there had been a fascinating treatise on morality, there was now only a lifeless hulk of dark reading matter. It was as if *The Scarlet Letter* had never been written. The storm bounced off, then attracted to the brighter lights of the Hemingway canon next door, struck off on a new course. I breathed a sigh of relief but then held my breath once more as the storm struck *In Our Time*--and glanced off. The sieve had held. Over the next few minutes the WordStorm ran between the books as planned, the textual sieves slowing it down as it brushed past the collected works of Hemingway.

"Damage report?"

"Slight grammatical warpage in *A Farewell to Arms*, but nothing serious," said the Cat. "*The Sun Also Rises* is reporting isolated bursts of narrative flexations, but nothing we can't handle. All other books report no damage."

"Good. Bring *The Scarlet Letter* back on-line."

We watched nervously as the storm slowly subsided. It had littered the Hemingway canon with words and ideas, but nothing violent enough to embed them and change the narrative. As likely as not the residents of the novels would just pick them up and sell them to traveling scrap merchants. But the WordStorm wasn't quite finished with us yet. After brushing past the preface to *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the storm suddenly sped up and, in its last dying throes, embedded a Bride Shot at the Altar plot device right at the end of Blackmore's *Lorna Doone*, where it remains to this day. Aside from that minor flexation, no real harm was done by the WordStorm. The senator berated me for a good ten minutes and filed a report on my behavior the following day, which was summarily rejected by the other members of the Jurisfiction oversight committee.

I left the Cat and Bradshaw to log the damage reports and thanked Dr. Howard and his staff for their slavish attention. I decided to walk back home, across the storycode engine floor and down the empty corridors of the Great Library to the Well of Lost Plots and back to bed. I was feeling quite good about myself. I had run a team of highly skilled technicians and saved *The Scarlet Letter* from almost certain devastation. It would be one of my easier tasks as Bellman, but I didn't know that yet. The evening had gone well. Landen would have been proud of me.

## *Credits*

Falstaff, the three witches, Banquo's ghost, Beatrice and Benedict--all kindly supplied by Shakespeare (William) Inc.

Our thanks to Mr. Heathcliff for graciously agreeing to appear in this novel.

Uriah Heep kindly loaned by Wickfield & Heep, attorneys-at-law.

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No unicorns were written expressly for this book, and no animals or Yahoos (other than grammasites) were harmed in its construction.

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The "galactic cleansing" policy undertaken by Emperor Zhark is a personal vision of the emperor's, and its inclusion in this work does not constitute tacit approval by the author or the publisher for any such projects, howsoever undertaken. Warning: The author may have eaten nuts while writing this book.

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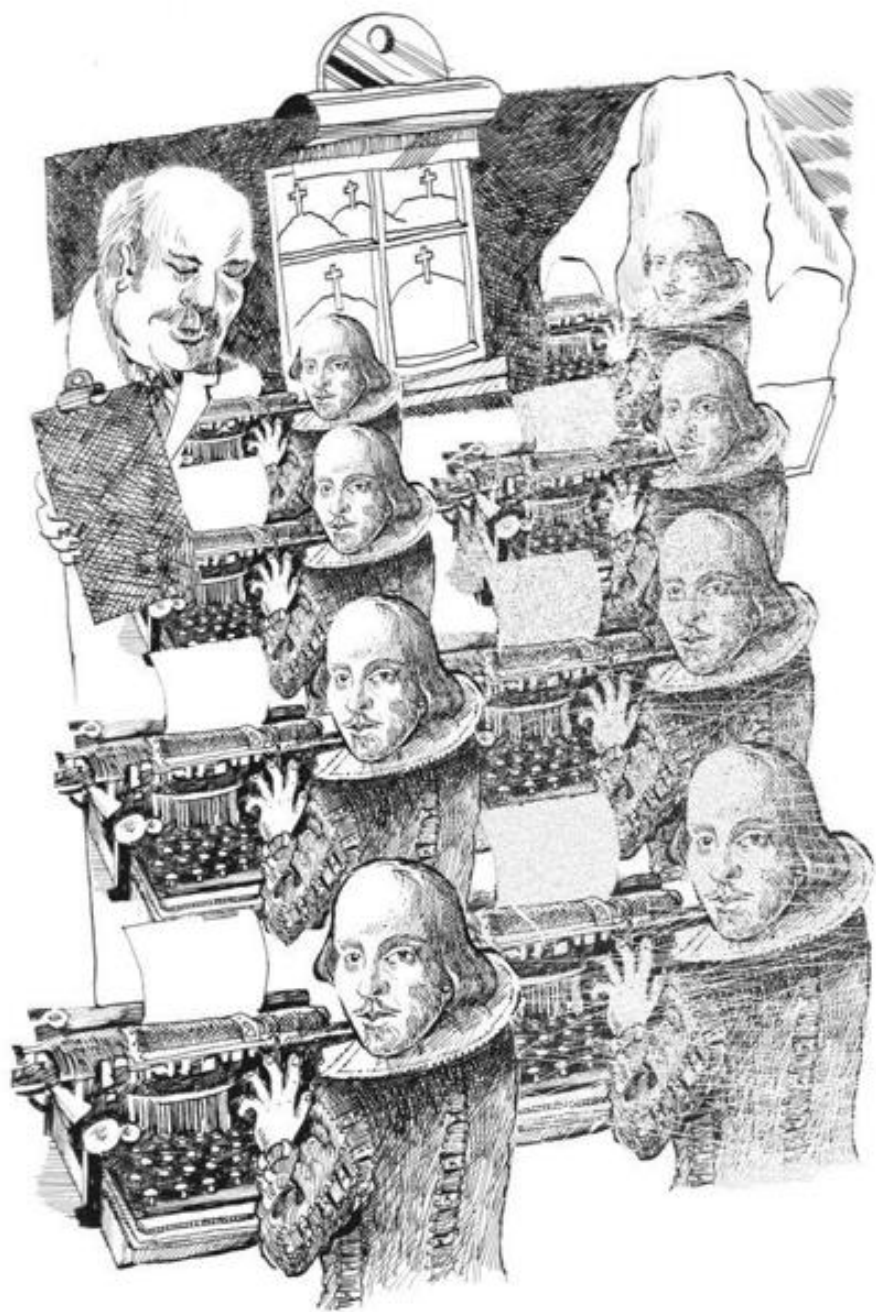
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*I tried to imagine the whole room full of Shakespeare clones clattering away at their typewriters. . . .*

THURSDAY NEXT  
IN

*Something  
Rotten*

A NOVEL

**Jasper Fforde**

VIKING

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*For Maddy, Rosie,  
Jordan and Alexander*

*With all my love*

April 2004



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*Credits*

## Author's Note

This book has been bundled with **Special Features**, including *The Making of* documentary, deleted scenes from all four books, outtakes and much more.

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and enter the code word as directed.

## Dramatis Personae

**Thursday Next:** Ex-operative from Swindon's Literary Detective office of SpecOps-27 and currently head of Jurisfiction, the policing agency that operates within fiction to safeguard the stability of the written word.

**Friday Next:** Thursday's son, age two.

**Granny Next:** Resident of Goliath Twilight Homes, Swindon. Age 110 and cannot die until she has read the ten most boring classics.

**Wednesday Next:** Thursday's mother. Resides in Swindon.

**Landen Parke-Laine:** Thursday's husband, who hasn't existed since he was eradicated in 1947 by the Goliath Corporation, eager to blackmail Miss Next.

**Mycroft Next:** Inventor uncle of Thursday and last heard of living in peaceful retirement within the backstory of the Sherlock Holmes series. Designer of Prose Portal and Sarcasm Early-Warning Device, amongst many other things. Husband to **Polly**.

**Colonel Next:** A time-traveling knight errant, he was eradicated by the ChronoGuard, a sort of temporal policing agency. Despite this, he is still about and meets Thursday from time to time.

**Cat formerly known as Cheshire:** The ex-Wonderland uberlibrarian at the Great Library and Jurisfiction agent.

**Pickwick:** A pet dodo of very little brain.

**Bowden Cable:** Colleague of Thursday's at the Swindon Literary Detectives.

**Victor Analogy:** Head of Swindon Literary Detectives.

**Braxton Hicks:** Overall commander of the Swindon Special Operations Network.

**Daphne Farquitt:** Romance writer whose talent is inversely proportional to her sales.

**The Goliath Corporation:** Vast, unscrupulous multinational corporation keen on spiritual and global domination.

**Commander Trafford Bradshaw:** Popular hero in 1920s ripping adventure stories for boys, now out of print, and notable Jurisfiction

agent.

**Melanie Bradshaw (Mrs.):** A gorilla, married to Commander Bradshaw.

**Mrs. Tiggy-winkle, Emperor Zhark, the Red Queen, Falstaff, Vernham Deane:** All Jurisdiction operatives, highly trained.

**Yorrick Kaine:** Whig politician and publishing media tycoon. Also right-wing Chancellor of England, soon to be made dictator. Fictional, and sworn enemy of Thursday Next.

**President George Formby:** Octogenarian President of England and deeply opposed to Yorrick Kaine and all that he stands for.

**Wales:** A Socialist Republic.

**Lady Emma Hamilton:** Consort of Admiral Horatio Lord Nelson and lush. Upset when her husband inexplicably died at the beginning of the Battle of Trafalgar. Lives in Mrs. Next's spare room.

**Hamlet:** A Danish prince with a propensity for prevarication.

**SpecOps:** Short for Special Operations, the governmental departments that deal with anything too rigorous for the ordinary police to handle. Everything from time travel to good taste.

**Bartholomew Stiggins:** Commonly known as "Stig." Neanderthal reengineered from extinction, he heads SpecOps-13 (Swindon), the policing agency responsible for reengineered species such as mammoths, dodos, saber-toothed tigers and chimeras.

**Chimera:** Any unlicensed "nonevolved life-form" created by a hobby genetic sequencer. Illegal and destroyed without mercy.

**St. Zvlkx:** A thirteenth-century saint whose revealments have an uncanny knack of coming true.

**SuperHoop:** The World Croquet League finals. Usually violent, always controversial.

**Lola Vavoom:** An actress who does not feature in this novel but has to appear in the *Dramatis Personae* due to a contractual obligation.

**Minotaur:** Half-man, half-bull son of Pasiphae, the Queen of Crete. Escaped from custody and consequently a PageRunner. Whereabouts unknown.

## A Cretan Mino taurin Nebraska

**Jurisdiction** is the name given to the policing agency *inside* books. Working with the intelligence-gathering capabilities of Text Grand Central, the many Prose Resource Operatives at Jurisdiction work tirelessly to maintain the continuity of the narrative within the pages of all the books ever written. Performing this sometimes thankless task, Jurisdiction agents live mostly on their wits as they attempt to reconcile the author's original wishes and readers' expectations against a strict and largely pointless set of bureaucratic guidelines laid down by the Council of Genres. I headed Jurisdiction for over two years and was always astounded by the variety of the work: one day I might be attempting to coax the impossibly shy Darcy from the toilets, and the next I would be thwarting the Martians' latest attempt to invade *Barnaby Rudge*. It was challenging and full of bizarre twists. But when the peculiar and downright weird becomes commonplace, you begin to yearn for the banal.

Thursday Next, *The Jurisdiction Chronicles*

The Minotaur had been causing trouble far in excess of his literary importance--first by escaping from the fantasy-genre prison erary importance--first by escaping from the fantasy-genre prison book *Sword of the Zenobians*, then by leading us on a merry chase across most of fiction and thwarting all attempts to recapture him. The mythological half-man, half-bull son of Queen Pasiphae of Crete had been sighted within *Riders of the Purple Sage* only a month after his escape. We were still keen on taking him alive at this point, so we had darted him with a small dose of slapstick. Theoretically, we needed only to track outbreaks of custard-pie-in-the-face routines and walking-into-lamppost gags within fiction to lead us to the cannibalistic man-beast. It was an experimental idea and, sadly, also a dismal failure. Aside from Lafeu's celebrated mention of custard in *All's Well That Ends Well* and the ludicrous four-wheeled-chaise

sequence in *Pickwick Papers*, little was noticed. The slapstick either hadn't been strong enough or had been diluted by the BookWorld's natural disinclination to visual jokes.

In any event we were still searching for him two years later in the western genre, amongst the cattle drives that the Minotaur found most relaxing. And it was for this reason that Commander Bradshaw and I arrived at the top of page 73 of an obscure pulp from the thirties entitled *Death at Double-X Ranch*.

"What do you think, old girl?" asked Bradshaw, whose pith helmet and safari suit were ideally suited to the hot Nebraskan summer. He was shorter than I by almost a head but led age-wise by four decades; his sun-dried skin and snowy white mustache were a legacy of his many years in colonial African fiction: He had been the lead character in the twenty-three "Commander Bradshaw" novels, last published in 1932 and last read in 1963. Many characters in fiction define themselves by their popularity, but not Commander Bradshaw. Having spent an adventurous and entirely fictional life defending British East Africa against a host of unlikely foes and killing almost every animal it was possible to kill, he now enjoyed his retirement and was much in demand at Jurisfiction, where his fearlessness under fire and knowledge of the BookWorld made him one of the agency's greatest assets.

He was pointing at a weathered board that told us the small township not more than half a mile ahead hailed by the optimistic name of Providence and had a population of 2,387.

I shielded my eyes against the sun and looked around. A carpet of sage stretched all the way to the mountains, less than five miles distant. The vegetation had a repetitive pattern that belied its fictional roots. The chaotic nature of the real world that gave us soft, undulating hills and random patterns of forest and hedges was replaced within fiction by a landscape that relied on ordered repetitions of the author's initial description. In the make-believe world where I had made my home, a forest has only eight different trees, a beach five different pebbles, a sky twelve different clouds. A hedgerow repeats itself every eight feet, a mountain range every sixth peak. It hadn't bothered me that much to begin with, but after two years living inside fiction, I had begun to yearn for a world where every tree and rock and hill and cloud has its own unique shape and identity. And the sunsets. I missed them most of all. Even the best-described ones couldn't hold a candle to a real one. I yearned to witness once again the delicate hues of the sky as the sun dipped below the horizon. From red to orange, to pink, to blue, to navy, to

black.

Bradshaw looked across at me and raised an eyebrow quizzically. As the Bellman--the head of Jurisdiction--I shouldn't really be out on assignment at all, but I was never much of a desk jockey, and capturing the Minotaur was important. He had killed one of our own, and that made it unfinished business.

During the past week, we had searched unsuccessfully through six Civil War epics, three frontier stories, twenty-eight high-quality westerns and ninety-seven dubiously penned novellas before finding ourselves within *Death at Double-X Ranch*, right on the outer rim of what might be described as acceptably written prose. We had drawn a blank in every single book. No Minotaur, nor even the merest whiff of one, and believe me, they can whiff.

"A possibility?" asked Bradshaw, pointing at the PROVIDENCE sign.

"We'll give it a try," I replied, slipping on a pair of dark glasses and consulting my list of potential Minotaur hiding places. "If we draw a blank, we'll stop for lunch before heading off into *The Oklahoma Kid*."

Bradshaw nodded and opened the breech of the hunting rifle he was carrying and slipped in a cartridge. It was a conventional weapon, but loaded with unconventional ammunition. Our position as the policing agency within fiction gave us licensed access to abstract technology. One blast from the eraserhead in Bradshaw's rifle and the Minotaur would be reduced to the building blocks of his fictional existence: text and a bluish mist--all that is left when the bonds that link text to meaning are severed. Charges of cruelty failed to have any meaning when at the last Beast Census there were over a million almost identical Minotaurs, all safely within the hundreds of books, graphic novels and urns that featured him. Ours was different--an escapee. A PageRunner.

As we walked closer, the sounds of a busy Nebraskan frontier town reached our ears. A new building was being erected, and the hammering of nails into lumber punctuated the clop of horses' hooves, the clink of harnesses and the rumble of cartwheels on compacted earth. The metallic ring of the blacksmith's hammer mixed with the distant tones of a choir from the clapboard church, and all about was the general conversational hubbub of busy townsfolk. We reached the corner by Eckley's Livery Stables and peered cautiously down the main street.

Providence as we now saw it was happily enjoying the uninterrupted backstory, patiently awaiting the protagonist's arrival in



two pages' time. Blundering into the main narrative thread and finding ourselves *included* within the story was not something we cared to do, and since the Minotaur avoided the primary story line for fear of discovery, we were likely to stumble across him only in places like this. But if for any reason the story *did* come anywhere near, I would be warned--I had a Narrative Proximity Device in my pocket that would sound an alarm if the thread came too close. We could hide ourselves until it passed by.

A horse trotted past as we stepped up onto the creaky decking that ran along in front of the saloon. I stopped Bradshaw when we got to the swinging doors as the town drunk was thrown out into the road. The bartender walked out after him, wiping his hands on a linen cloth.

"And don't come back till you can pay your way!" he yelled, glancing at us both suspiciously.

I showed the barkeeper my Jurisdiction badge as Bradshaw kept a vigilant lookout. The whole western genre had far too many gun-slingers for its own good; there had been some confusion over the numbers required on the order form when the genre was inaugurated. Working in westerns could sometimes entail up to twenty-nine gunfights an hour.

"Jurisdiction," I told him. "This is Bradshaw, I'm Next. We're looking for the Minotaur."

The barkeeper stared at me coldly. "Think you's in the wrong genre, pod'ner," he said.

All characters or Generics within a book are graded A to D, one through ten. A-grades are the Gatsbys and Jane Eyres, D-grades the grunts who make up street scenes and crowded rooms. The barkeeper had lines, so he was probably a C-2. Smart enough to get answers from but not smart enough to have much character latitude.

"He might be using the alias Norman Johnson," I went on, showing him a photo. "Tall, body of a man, head of a bull, likes to eat people?"

"Can't help you," he said, shaking his head slowly as he peered at the photo.

"How about any outbreaks of slapstick?" asked Bradshaw. "Boxing glove popping out of a box, sixteen-ton weights dropping on people, that sort of thing?"

"Ain't seen no weights droppin' on nobody," laughed the barkeeper, "but I hear tell the sheriff got hit in the face with a frying pan last

Toosday."

Bradshaw and I exchanged glances.

"Where do we find the sheriff?" I asked.

We followed the barkeeper's directions and walked along the wooden decking past a barbershop and two grizzled prospectors who were talking animatedly in authentic frontier gibberish. I stopped Bradshaw when we got to an alleyway. There was a gunfight in progress. Or at least, there *would* have been a gunfight had not some dispute arisen over the times allocated for their respective showdowns. Both sets of gunmen--two dressed in light-colored clothes, two in dark--with low-slung gun belts decorated with rows of shiny cartridges--were arguing over their gunfight time slots as two identical ladyfolk looked on anxiously. The town's mayor intervened and told them that if there were any more arguments, they would *both* lose their slot times and would have to come back tomorrow, so they reluctantly agreed to toss a coin. The winners of the toss scampered into the main street as everyone dutifully ran for cover. They squared up to one another, hands hovering over their Colt .45s at twenty paces. There was a flurry of action, two loud detonations, and then the gunman in black hit the dirt while the victor looked on grimly, his opponent's shot having dramatically only removed his hat. His lady rushed up to hug him as he reholstered his revolver with a flourish.

"What a load of tripe," muttered Bradshaw. "The real West wasn't like this!"

*Death at Double-X Ranch* was set in 1875 and written in 1908. Close enough to be historically accurate, you would have thought, but no. Most westerns tended to show a glamorized version of the Old West that hadn't really existed. In the *real* West, a gunfight was a rarity, hitting someone with a short-barreled Colt .45 at anything other than point-blank range a virtual impossibility. The 1870s gunpowder generated a huge amount of smoke; two shots in a crowded bar and you would be coughing--and almost blind.

"That's not the point," I replied as the dead gunslinger was dragged away. "Legend is always far more readable, and don't forget we're in pulp at present--poor prose always outnumbers good prose, and it would be too much to hope that our bullish friend would be hiding out in Zane Grey or Owen Wister."

We continued on past the Majestic Hotel as a stagecoach rumbled by in a cloud of dust, the driver cracking his long whip above the horses' heads.

"Over there," said Bradshaw, pointing at a building opposite that differentiated itself from the rest of the clapboard town by being made of brick. It had SHERIFF painted above the door, and we walked quickly across the road, our nonwestern garb somewhat out of place amongst the long dresses, bonnets and breeches, jackets, dusters, vests, gun belts and bootlace ties. Only permanently billeted Jurisdiction officers troubled to dress up, and many of the agents actively policing the westerns are characters from the books they patrol--so they don't need to dress up anyway.

We knocked and entered. It was dark inside after the bright exterior, and we blinked for few moments as we accustomed ourselves to the gloom. On the wall to our right was a notice board liberally covered with wanted posters--pertaining not only to Nebraska but also to the BookWorld in general; a yellowed example offered three hundred dollars for information leading to the whereabouts of Big Martin. Below this was a chipped enameled coffeepot sitting atop a cast-iron stove, and next to the wall to the left were a gun cabinet and a tabby cat sprawled upon a large bureau. The far wall was the barred frontage to the cells, one of which held a drunk fast asleep and snoring loudly on a bunk bed. In the middle of the room was a large desk that was stacked high with paperwork--circulars from the Nebraska State Legislature, a few Council of Genres Narrative Law amendments, a Campanology Society newsletter and a Sears, Roebuck catalog open to the "fancy goods" section. Also on the desk were a pair of worn leather boots, and inside these were a pair of feet, attached in turn to the sheriff. His clothes were predominantly black and could have done with a good wash. A tin star was pinned to his vest, and all we could see of his face were the ends of a large gray mustache that poked out from beneath his downturned Stetson. He, too, was fast asleep, and balanced precariously on the rear two legs of a chair that creaked as he snored.

"Sheriff ?"

No answer.

"SHERIFF!"

He awoke with a start, began to get up, overbalanced and tipped over backwards. He crashed heavily on the floor and knocked against the bureau, which just happened to have a jug of water resting upon it. The jug overbalanced as well, and its contents drenched the sheriff, who roared with shock. The noise upset the cat, who awoke with a cry and leapt up the curtains, which collapsed with a crash on the cast-iron stove, spilling the coffee and setting fire to the tinder-dry linen

drapes. I ran to put it out and knocked against the desk, dislodging the lawman's loaded revolver, which fell to the floor, discharging a single shot, which cut the cord of a stuffed moose's head, which fell upon Bradshaw. So there were the three of us: me trying to put out the fire, the sheriff covered in water and Bradshaw walking into furniture as he tried to get the moose's head off him. It was *precisely* what we were looking for: an outbreak of unconstrained and wholly inappropriate slapstick.

"Sheriff, I'm so sorry about this," I muttered apologetically, having doused the fire, demoosed Bradshaw and helped a very damp lawman to his feet. He was over six foot tall, and had a weather-beaten face and deep blue eyes. I produced my badge. "Thursday Next, head of Jurisfiction. This is my partner, Commander Bradshaw." The sheriff relaxed and even managed a thin smile.

"Thought you was more of them Baxters," he said, brushing himself down and drying his hair with a "Cathouses of Dawson City" tea cloth. "I'll be mighty glad you're not. Jurisfiction, hey? Ain't seen none of youse around these parts for longer then I care to remember--quit it, Howell."

The drunk, Howell, had awoken and was demanding a tipple "to set him straight."

"We're looking for the Minotaur," I explained, showing the sheriff the photograph.

He rubbed his stubble thoughtfully and shook his head. "Don't recall ever seeing this critter, missy Next."

"We have reason to believe he passed through your office not long ago--he's been marked with slapstick."

"Ah!" said the sheriff. "I was a-wonderin' 'bout all that. Me and Howell here have been trippin' and a-stumblin' for a while now--ain't we, Howell?"

"You're darn tootin'," said the drunk.

"He could be in disguise and operating under an alias," I ventured. "Does the name Norman Johnson mean anything to you?"

"Can't say it does, missy. We have twenty-six Johnsons here, but all are C-7s--not 'portant 'nuff to have fust names."

I sketched a Stetson onto the photograph of the Minotaur, then a

duster, vest and gun belt.

"Oh!" said the sheriff with a sudden look of recognition. "*That* Mr. Johnson."

"You know where he is?"

"Sure do. Had him in jail only last week on charges of eatin' a cattle rustler."

"What happened?"

"Paid his bail and wuz released. Ain't nothing in the Nebraska statutes that says you can't eat rustlers. One moment."

There had been a shot outside, followed by several yells from startled townsfolk. The sheriff checked his Colt, opened the door and walked out. Alone on the street and facing him was a young man with an earnest expression, hand quivering around his gun, the elegantly tooled holster of which I noticed had been tied down--a sure sign of yet another potential gunfight.

"Go home, Abe!" called out the sheriff. "Today's not a good day for dyin'."

"You killed my pappy," said the youth, "and my pappy's pappy. And *his* pappy's pappy. And my brothers Jethro, Hank, Hoss, Red, Peregrine, Marsh, Junior, Dizzy, Luke, Peregrine, George an' all the others. I'm callin' you out, lawman."

"You said Peregrine twice."

"He wuz special."

"Abel Baxter," whispered the sheriff out of the corner of his mouth, "one of them Baxter boys. They turn up regular as clockwork, and I kill 'em same ways as regular."

"How many have you killed?" I whispered back.

"Last count, 'bout sixty. Go home, Abe, I won't tell yer again!"

The youth caught sight of Bradshaw and me and said, "New deputies, Sheriff? Yer gonna need 'em!"

And it was then we saw that Abel Baxter wasn't alone. Stepping out from the stables opposite were four disreputable-looking characters. I frowned. They seemed somehow out of place in *Death at Double-X Ranch*. For a start, none of them wore black, nor did they have tooled leather double gun belts with nickel-plated revolvers. Their spurs

didn't clink as they walked, and their holsters were plain and worn high on the hip--the weapon these men had chosen was a Winchester rifle. I noticed with a shudder that one of the men had a button missing on his frayed vest and the sole on the toe of his boot had come adrift. Flies buzzed around the men's unwashed and grimy faces, and sweat had stained their hats halfway to the crown. These weren't C-2 generic gunfighters from pulp, but well described A-9s from a novel of high descriptive quality--and if they could shoot as well as they had been realized by the author, we were in trouble.

The sheriff sensed it, too.

"Where yo' friends from, Abe?"

One of the men hooked his Winchester into the crook of his arm and answered in a low southern drawl, "Mr. Johnson sent us."

And they opened fire. No waiting, no drama, no narrative pace. Bradshaw and I had already begun to move--squaring up in front of a gunman with a rifle might seem terribly macho, but for survival purposes it was a nonstarter. Sadly, the sheriff didn't realize this until it was too late. If he had survived until page 164 as he was meant to, he would have taken a slug, rolled twice in the dust after a two-page buildup and lived long enough to say a pithy final good-bye to his sweetheart, who cradled him in his bloodless dying moments. Not to be. Realistic violent death was to make an unwelcome entry into *Death at Double-X Ranch*. The heavy lead shot entered the sheriff's chest and came out the other side, leaving an exit wound the size of a saucer. He collapsed inelegantly onto his face and lay perfectly still, one arm sprawled outwards in a manner unattainable in life and the other hooked beneath him. He didn't collapse flat either. He ended up bent over on his knees with his backside in the air.

The gunmen stopped firing as soon as there was no target--but Bradshaw, his hunting instincts alerted, had already drawn a bead on the sheriff's killer and fired. There was an almighty detonation, a brief flash and a large cloud of smoke. The eraserhead hit home, and the gunman disintegrated midstride into a brief chrysanthemum of text that scattered across the main street, the meaning of the words billowing out into a blue haze that hung near the ground for a moment or two before evaporating.



"Did you see how much text he was composed of?" I replied angrily. "He was almost a paragraph long. Only *featured* characters get that kind of description--somewhere there's going to be a book one character short!"

"But," replied Bradshaw in an aggrieved tone, "I didn't know that before I shot him, now did I?"

I shook my head. Perhaps Bradshaw hadn't noticed the missing button, the sweat stains and the battered shoes, but *I* had. Erasure of a featured part meant more paperwork than I really wanted to deal with. From Form F36/34 (Discharge of an Eraserhead) and Form B9/32 (Replacement of Featured Part) to Form P13/36 (Narrative Damage Assessment), I could be bogged down for two whole days. I had thought bureaucracy was bad in the real world, but here in the paper world, it was everything.

"So what do we do?" asked Bradshaw. "Ask politely for them to surrender?"

"I'm thinking," I replied, pulling out my footnoterphone and pressing the button marked CAT. In fiction the commonest form of communication was by footnote, but way out here . . .

"Blast!" I muttered again. "No signal."

"Nearest repeater station is in *The Virginian*," observed Bradshaw as he replaced the spent cartridge and closed the breech before peering outside, "and we can't bookjump direct from pulp to classic."

He was right. We had been crossing from book to book for almost six days, and although we could escape in an emergency, such a course of action would give the Minotaur more than enough time to escape. Things weren't good, but they weren't bad either--yet.

"Hey!" I yelled from the sheriff's office. "We want to talk!"

"Is that a fact?" came a clear voice from outside. "Mr. Johnson says he's all done talkin'--less you be in mind to offer amnesty."

"We can talk about that!" I replied.

There was a beeping noise from my pocket.

"Blast," I mumbled again, consulting the Narrative Proximity Device. "Bradshaw, we've got a story thread inbound from the East, two hundred and fifty yards and closing. Page 74, line 6."

Bradshaw quickly opened his copy of *Death at Double-X Ranch* and



ran a finger along the line "*McNeil rode into the town of Providence, Nebraska, with fifty cents in his pocket and murder on his mind. . . .*"

I cautiously peered out the window. Sure enough, a cowboy on a bay horse was riding slowly into town. Strictly speaking, it didn't matter if we changed the story a little, as the novella had been read only sixteen times in the past ten years, but the code by which we worked was fairly unequivocal. "Keep the story as the author intended!" was a phrase bashed into me early on during my training. I had broken it once and would pay the consequences--I didn't want to do it again.

"I need to speak to Mr. Johnson," I yelled, keeping an eye on McNeil, who was still some way distant.

"No one speaks to Mr. Johnson 'less Mr. Johnson says so," replied the voice, "but if you'll be offerin' an amnesty, he'll take it and promise not to eat no more people."

"Was that a double negative?" whispered Bradshaw with disdain. "I do so hate them."

"No deal unless I meet Mr. Johnson first!" I yelled back.

"Then there's no deal!" came the reply.

I looked out again and saw three more gunmen appear. The Minotaur had clearly made a lot of friends during his stay in the western genre.

"We need backup," I murmured.

Bradshaw clearly thought the same. He opened his TravelBook and pulled out something that looked a little like a flare gun. This was a TextMarker, which could be used to signal to other Jurisdiction agents. The TravelBook was dimensionally ambivalent; the device was actually *larger* than the book that contained it.

"Jurisdiction knows we're in western pulp; they just don't know *where*. I'll send them a signal."

He dialed in the sort of TextMarker he was going to place, using a knob on the back of the gun, then moved to the door, aimed the marker into the air and fired. There was a dull thud, and the projectile soared into the sky. It exploded noiselessly high above us, and for an instant I could see the text of the page in a light gray against the blue of the sky. The words were back to front, of course, and as I looked at Bradshaw's copy of *Death at Double-X Ranch*, I noticed that the written word "ProVidence" had been partially capitalized. Help would soon

arrive--a show of force would deal with the gunmen. The problem was, would the Minotaur make a run for it or fight it out to the end?

"Purty fireworks don't scare us, missy," said the voice again. "You comin' out, or do we-uns have to come in and get yer?"

I looked across at Bradshaw, who was smiling. "What?"

"This is all quite a caper, don't you think?" said the Commander, chuckling like a schoolboy who had just been caught stealing apples. "Much more fun than hunting elephant, wrestling lions to the ground and returning tribal knickknacks stolen by unscrupulous foreigners."

"I used to think so," I said under my breath. Two years of assignments like these had been enjoyable and challenging, but not without their moments of terror, uncertainty and panic--and I had a two-year-old son who needed more attention than I could give him. The pressure of running Jurisdiction had been building for a long time now, and I needed a break in the real world--a long one. I had felt it about six months before, just after the adventure that came to be known as the Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco, but had shrugged it off. Now the feeling was back--and stronger.

A low, deep rumble began somewhere overhead. The windows rattled in their frames, and dust fell from the rafters. A crack opened up in the plaster, and a cup vibrated off the table to break on the floor. One of the windows shattered, and a shadow fell across the street. The deep rumble grew in volume, drowned out the Narrative Proximity Device that was wailing plaintively, then became so loud it didn't seem like a sound at all--just a vibration that shook the sheriff's office so strongly my sight blurred. Then, as the clock fell from the wall and smashed into pieces, I realized what was going on.

"Oh . . . *no!* " I howled with annoyance as the noise waned to a dull roar. "Talk about using a sledgehammer to crack a nut!"

"Emperor Zhark?" queried Bradshaw.

"Who else would dare pilot a Zharkian battle cruiser into western pulp?"

We looked outside as the vast spaceship passed overhead, its vectored thrusters swiveling downwards with a hot rush of concentrated power that blew up a gale of dust and debris and set the livery stables on fire. The huge bulk of the battle cruiser hovered for a moment as the landing gear unfolded, then made a delicate touchdown--right on top of McNeil and his horse, who were squashed to the thickness of a ha'penny.

My shoulders sagged as I watched my paperwork increase exponentially. The townsfolk ran around in panic and horses bolted as the A-7 gunmen fired pointlessly at the ship's armored hull. Within a few moments, the interstellar battle cruiser had disgorged a small army of foot soldiers carrying the very latest Zharkian weaponry. I groaned. It was not unusual for the Emperor to go overboard at moments like this. Undisputed villain of the eight Emperor Zhark books, the most feared tyrannical god-emperor of the known galaxy just didn't seem to comprehend the meaning of restraint.

In a few minutes, it was all over. The A-7s had either been killed or escaped to their own books, and the Zharkian Marine Corps had been dispatched to find the Minotaur. I could have saved them the trouble. He would be long gone. The A-7s and McNeil would have to be sourced and replaced, the whole book rejigged to remove the twenty-sixth-century battle cruiser that had arrived uninvited into 1875 Nebraska. It was a flagrant breach of the Anti-Cross-Genre Code that we attempted to uphold within fiction. I wouldn't have minded so much if this was an isolated incident, but Zhark did this too often to be ignored. I could hardly control myself as the Emperor descended from his starship with an odd entourage of aliens and Mrs. Tiggy-winkle, who also worked for Jurisdiction.

"What the hell do you think you're playing at!?"

"Oh!" said the Emperor, taken aback at my annoyance. "I thought you'd be pleased to see us!"

"The situation was bad, but not *irredeemable*," I told him, sweeping my arm in the direction of the town. "Now look what you've done!"

He looked around. The confused townsfolk had started to emerge from the remains of the buildings. Nothing so odd as this had happened in a western since an alien brainsucker had escaped from SF and been caught inside *Wild Horse Mesa*.

"You do this to me every time! Have you no conception of stealth and subtlety?"

"Not really," said the Emperor, looking at his hands nervously. "Sorry."

His alien entourage, not wanting to hang around in case they *also* got an earful, walked, slimed or hovered back into Zhark's ship.

"You sent a TextMarker--"

"So what if we did? Can't you enter a book without destroying

everything in sight?"

"Steady on, Thursday," said Bradshaw, laying a calming hand on my arm. "We did ask for assistance, and if old Zharky here was the closest, you can't blame him for wanting to help. After all, when you consider that he usually lays waste to entire galaxies, torching just the town of ProViDence and not the whole of Nebraska was actually quite an achievement . . ." His voice trailed off before he added, ". . . for him."

"AHHH!" I yelled in frustration, holding my head. "Sometimes I think I'm--"

I stopped. I lost my temper now and again, but rarely with my colleagues, and when that happens, things are getting bad. When I started this job, it was great fun, as it still was to Bradshaw. But just lately the enjoyment had waned. It was no good. I'd had enough. I needed to go *home*.

"Thursday?" asked Mrs. Tiggy-winkle, concerned by my sudden silence. "Are you okay?"

She came too close and spined me with one of her quills. I yelped and rubbed my arm while she jumped back and hid a blush. Six-foot-high hedgehogs have their own brand of etiquette.

"I'm fine," I replied, dusting myself down. "It's just that things have a way of . . . well, *spiraling* out of control."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? *What do I mean?* Well, this morning I was tracking a mythological beast using a trail of custard-pie incidents across the Old West, and this afternoon a battle cruiser from the twenty-sixth century lands in ProViDence, Nebraska. Doesn't that sound sort of crazy?"

"This is fiction," replied Zhark in all innocence. "Odd things are *meant* to happen."

"Not to me," I said with finality. "I want to see some sort of semblance of . . . of *reality* in my life."

"Reality?" echoed Mrs. Tiggy-winkle. "You mean a place where hedgehogs don't talk or do washing?"

"But who'll run Jurisfiction?" demanded the Emperor. "You were the best we ever had!"

I shook my head, threw up my hands and walked to where the

ground was peppered with the A-7 gunman's text. I picked up a *D* and turned it over in my hands.

"Please reconsider," said Commander Bradshaw, who had followed me. "I think you'll find, old girl, that reality is much overrated."

"Not overrated *enough*, Bradshaw," I replied with a shrug. "Sometimes the top job isn't the easiest one."

"Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown," murmured Bradshaw, who probably understood me better than most. He and his wife were the best friends I had in the BookWorld; Mrs. Bradshaw and my son were almost inseparable.

"I knew you wouldn't stay for good," continued Bradshaw, lowering his voice so the others didn't hear. "When will you go?"

I shrugged. "Soon as I can. Tomorrow."

I looked around at the destruction that Zhark had wrought upon *Death at Double-X Ranch*. There would be a lot of clearing up, a mountain of paperwork--and there might be the possibility of disciplinary action if the Council of Genres got wind of what had happened.

"I suppose I should complete the paperwork on this debacle first," I said slowly. "Let's say three days."

"You promised to stand in for Joan of Arc while she attended a martyrs' refresher course," added Mrs. Tiggy-winkle, who had tiptoed closer.

I'd forgotten about that. "A week, then. I'll be off in a week." We all stood in silence, I pondering my return to Swindon and all of them considering the consequences of my departure--except Emperor Zhark, who was probably thinking about invading the planet Thraal, for fun.

"Your mind is made up?" asked Bradshaw. I nodded slowly. There were other reasons for me to return to the real world, more pressing than Zhark's gung ho lunacy. I had a husband who didn't exist and a son who couldn't spend his life cocooned inside books. I had retreated into the old Thursday, the one who preferred the black-and-white certainties of policing fiction to the ambiguous midtone grays of emotion.

"Yes, my mind's made up," I said, smiling. I looked at Bradshaw, the Emperor and Mrs. Tiggy-winkle. For all their faults, I'd enjoyed working with them. It hadn't been *all* bad. Whilst at Jurisfiction I had seen and done things I wouldn't have believed. I'd watched

grammasites in flight over the pleasure domes of Xanadu, felt the strangeness of listeners glittering on the dark stair. I had cantered bareback on unicorns through the leafy forests of Zenobia and played chess with Ozymandias, the King of Kings. I had flown with Biggles on the Western Front, locked cutlasses with Long John Silver and explored the path not taken to walk upon England's mountains green. But despite all these moments of wonder and delight, my heart belonged back home in Swindon and to a man named Landen Parke-Laine. He was my husband, the father of my son; he didn't exist, and I loved him.

## No Place Like Home

**Swindon, Wessex, England**, was the place I was born and where I lived until I left to join the Literary Detectives in London. I returned ten years later and married my former boyfriend, Landen Parke-Laine. He was subsequently murdered at the age of two by the Goliath Corporation, who had decided to blackmail me. It worked, I helped them--but I didn't get my husband back. Oddly, I kept his son, my son, Friday--it was one of those quirky, paradoxical time-travel things that my father understands but I don't. Two years further on, Landen was still dead, and unless I did something about it soon, he might remain that way forever.

Thursday Next, *Thursday Next: A Life in SpecOps*

It was a bright and clear morning in mid-July two weeks later that I found myself on the corner of Broome Manor Lane in Swindon, on the opposite side of the road to my mother's house with a toddler in a stroller, two dodos, the Prince of Denmark, an apprehensive heart and hair cut way too short. The Council of Genres hadn't taken the news of my resignation very well. In fact, they'd refused to accept it at all and given me instead unlimited leave, in the somewhat deluded hope that I might return if actualizing my husband "didn't work out." They also suggested I might like to deal with escaped fictionaut Yorrick Kaine, someone with whom I had crossed swords twice in the past.

Hamlet had been a late addition to my plans. Increasingly concerned over reports that he was being misrepresented as something of a "ditherer" in the Outland, he had requested leave to see for himself. This was unusual in that fictional characters are rarely troubled by public perception, but Hamlet would worry about having nothing to worry about if he had nothing to worry about, and since he was the indisputable star of the Shakespeare canon and had lost the Most Troubled Romantic Lead to Heathcliff once again at this year's BookWorld awards, the Council of Genres thought they should do something to appease him. Besides, Jurisfiction had been trying to

persuade him to police Elizabethan drama since Sir John Falstaff had retired on grounds of "good health," and a trip to the Outland, it was thought, might persuade him.

" 'Tis very strange!" he murmured, staring at the sun, trees, houses and traffic in turn. "It would take a rhapsody of wild and whirling words to do justice of all that I witness!"

"You're going to have to speak English out here."

"All this," explained Hamlet, waving his hands at the fairly innocuous Swindon street, "would take millions of words to describe correctly!"

"You're right. It would. That's the magic of the book imaginotransference technology," I told him. "A few dozen words conjure up an entire picture. But in all honesty the reader does most of the work."

"The reader? What's it got to do with him?"

"Well, each interpretation of an event, setting or character is unique to each of those who read it because they clothe the author's description with the memory of their own experiences. Every character they read is actually a complex amalgam of people that they've met, read or seen before--far more real than it can ever be just from the text on the page. Because every reader's experiences are different, each book is unique for each reader."

"So," replied the Dane, thinking hard, "what you're saying is that the more complex and apparently contradictory the character, the greater the possible interpretations?"

"Yes. In fact, I'd argue that every time a book is read by the same person it is different again--because the reader's experiences have changed, or he is in a different frame of mind."

"Well, that explains why no one can figure me out. After four hundred years nobody's quite decided what, *exactly*, my inner motivations are." He paused for a moment and sighed mournfully. "Including me. You'd have thought I was religious, wouldn't you, with all that not wanting to kill Uncle Claudius when at prayer and suchlike?"

"Of course."

"I thought so, too. So why do I use the atheistic line: *there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so*? What's that all about?"

"You mean you don't know?"



"Listen, I'm as confused as anyone."

I stared at Hamlet and he shrugged. I had been hoping to get some answers out of him regarding the inconsistencies within his play, but now I wasn't so sure.

"Perhaps," I said thoughtfully, "that's why we like it. To each our own Hamlet."

"Well," snorted the Dane unhappily, "it's a mystery to me. Do you think therapy would help?"

"I'm not sure. Listen, we're almost home. Remember: to anyone but family you're--who are you?"

"Cousin Eddie."

"Good. Come on."

Mum's house was a detached property of good proportions in the south of the town, but of no great charm other than that which my long association had bred upon it. I had spent the first eighteen years of my life growing up here, and everything about the old house was familiar. From the tree I had fallen out of and cracked a collarbone to the garden path where I had learned to ride my bicycle. I hadn't really noticed it before, but empathy for the familiar grows stronger with age. The old house felt warmer to me now than it ever had before.

I took a deep breath, picked up my suitcase and trundled the stroller across the road. My pet dodo, Pickwick, followed with her unruly son, Alan, padding grumpily after her.

I rang Mum's doorbell, and after about a minute, a slightly overweight vicar with short brown hair and spectacles answered the door.

"Is that Doofus . . . ?" he said when he saw me, suddenly breaking into a broad grin. "By the GSD, it is Doofus!"

"Hi, Joffy. Long time no see."

Joffy was my brother. He was a minister in the Global Standard Deity religion, and although we had had differences in the past, they were long forgotten. I was pleased to see him, and he I.

"Whoa!" he said. "What's that?"

"That's Friday," I explained. "Your nephew."

"Wow!" replied Joffy, undoing Friday's harness and lifting him out. "Does his hair always stick up like that?"

"Probably leftovers from breakfast."

Friday stared at Joffy for a moment, took his fingers out of his mouth, rubbed them on his face, put them in again and offered Joffy his polar bear, Poley.

"Kind of cute, isn't he?" said Joffy, jiggling Friday up and down and letting him tug at his nose. "But a bit . . . well, *sticky*. Does he talk?"

"Not a lot. Thinks a great deal, though."

"Like Mycroft. What happened to your head?"

"You mean my haircut?"

"So that's what it was!" murmured Joffy. "I thought you'd had your ears lowered or something. Bit . . . er . . . bit *extreme*, isn't it?"

"I had to stand in for Joan of Arc. It's always tricky to find a replacement."

"I can see why," exclaimed Joffy, still staring incredulously at my pudding-bowl haircut. "Why don't you just have the whole lot off and start again?"

"This is Hamlet," I said, introducing the Prince before he began to feel awkward, "but he's here incognito so I'm telling everyone he's my cousin Eddie."

"Joffy," said Joffy, "brother of Thursday."

"Hamlet," said Hamlet, "Prince of Denmark."

"Danish?" said Joffy with a start. "I shouldn't spread that around if I were you."

"Why?"

"Darling!" said my mother, appearing behind Joffy. "You're back! Goodness! Your hair!"

"It's a Joan of Arc thing," explained Joffy, "very fashionable right now. Martyrs are big on the catwalk, y'know--remember the Edith Cavell / Tolpuddle look in last month's *FeMole*?"

"He's talking rubbish again, isn't he?"

"Yes," said Joffy and I in unison.

"Hello, Mum," I said, giving her a hug. "Remember your grandson?"

She picked him up and remarked how much he had grown. It was unlikely in the extreme that he had *shrunk*, but I smiled dutifully nonetheless. I tried to visit the real world as often as I could but hadn't been able to manage it for at least six months. When she had nearly fainted by hyperventilating with ooohs and aaaahs and Friday had stopped looking at her dubiously, she invited us indoors.

"You stay out here," I said to Pickwick, "and don't let Alan misbehave himself."

It was too late. Alan, small size notwithstanding, had already terrorized Mordecai and the other dodos into submission. They all shivered in fright beneath the hydrangeas.

"Are you staying for long?" inquired my mother. "Your room is just how you left it."

This meant just how I left it when I was nineteen, but I thought it rude to say so. I explained that I'd like to stay at least until I got an apartment sorted out, introduced Hamlet and asked if he could stay for a few days, too.

"Of course! Lady Hamilton's in the spare room and that nice Mr. Bismarck is in the attic, so he can have the box room."

My mother grasped Hamlet's hand and shook it heartily. "How are you, Mr. Hamlet? Where did you say you were the prince of again?"

"Denmark."

"Ah! No visitors after seven P.M. and breakfast stops at nine A.M. prompt. I do expect guests to make their own beds and if you need washing done you can put it in the wicker basket on the landing. Pleased to meet you. I'm Mrs. Next, Thursday's mother."

"I have a mother," replied Hamlet gloomily as he bowed politely and kissed my mother's hand. "She shares my uncle's bed."

"They should buy another one, in that case," she replied, practical as ever. "They do a very good deal at IKEA, I'm told. Don't use it myself because I don't like all that self-assembly--I mean, what's the point of paying for something you have to build yourself? But it's popular with men for *exactly* that same reason. Do you like Battenberg?"

"Wittenberg?"

"No, no. *Battenberg*."

"On the river Eder?" asked Hamlet, confused over my mother's conversational leap from self-assembly furniture to cake.

"No, silly, on a doily--covered with marzipan."

Hamlet leaned closer to me. "I think your mother may be insane--and I should know."

"You'll get the hang of what she's talking about," I said, giving him a reassuring pat on the arm.

We walked through the hall to the living room, where, after managing to extract Friday's fingers from Mum's beads, we managed to sit down.

"So tell me all your news!" she exclaimed as my eyes flicked around the room, trying to take in all the many potential hazards for a two-year-old.

"Where do you want me to begin?" I asked, removing the vase of flowers from the top of the TV before Friday had a chance to pull them over on himself. "I had a flurry of things to do before I left. Two days ago I was in Camelot trying to sort out some marital strife, and the day before--sweetheart, don't touch that--I was negotiating a pay dispute with the Union of Orcs."

"Goodness!" replied my mother. "You must be simply *dying* for a cup of tea."

"Please. The BookWorld might be the cat's pajamas for characterization and explosive narrative, but you can't get a decent cup of tea for all the bourbon in Hemingway."

"I'll do it!" said Joffy. "C'mon, Hamlet, tell me about yourself. Got a girlfriend?"

"Yes--but she's bonkers."

"In a good way or a bad way?"

Hamlet shrugged. "Neither--just bonkers. But her brother--hell's teeth! Talk about sprung-loaded . . . !"

Their conversation faded as they disappeared into the kitchen.

"Don't forget the Battenberg," my mother called after them.

I opened my suitcase and took out a few rattly toys Mrs. Bradshaw had given me. Melanie had looked after Friday a lot, as she and Commander Bradshaw had no children of their own, what with

Melanie's being a mountain gorilla, so she had doted on Friday. It had its upsides: he always ate his greens and loved fruit, but I had my suspicions that they climbed on the furniture when I wasn't about, and once I found Friday trying to peel a banana with his feet.

"How's life treating you?" I asked.

"Better for seeing you. It's quite lonely with Mycroft and Polly away at the Fourteenth Annual Mad Scientists' Conference. If it wasn't for Joffy and his partner Miles popping round every day, Bismarck and Emma, Mrs. Beatty next door, Eradications Anonymous, my auto-body work class and that frightful Mrs. Daniels, I'd be completely alone. Should Friday be in that cupboard?"

I turned, jumped up and grabbed Friday by the straps of his dungarees and gently took the two crystal wineglasses from his inquisitive grasp. I showed him his toys and sat him down in the middle of the room. He stayed put for about three seconds before tottering off in the direction of DH-82, Mum's bone-idle Thylacine, who was asleep on a nearby chair.

DH-82 yelped as Friday tugged playfully at his whiskers. The Thylacine then got up, yawned and went to find his supper dish. Friday followed. And I followed Friday.

"--in the ear?" said Joffy as I walked into the kitchen. "Does that work?"

"Apparently," replied the Prince. "We found him stone dead in the orchard."

I scooped up Friday, who was about to tuck in to DH-82's food, and took him back to the living room.

"Sorry," I explained. "He's into everything at the moment. Tell me about Swindon. Much changed?"

"Not really. The Christmas lights have improved tremendously, there's a Skyrail line straight through the Brunel Centre, and Swindon now has twenty-six different supermarkets."

"Can the residents eat that much?"

"We're giving it our best shot."

Joffy walked back in with Hamlet and placed a tray of tea things in front of us.

"That small dodo of yours is a terror. Tried to peck me when I

wasn't looking."

"You probably startled him. How's Dad?"

Joffy, to whom this was a touchy subject, decided not to join us but play with Friday instead.

"C'mon, young lad," he said, "let's get drunk and shoot some pool."

"Your father has been wanting to get hold of you for a while," said my mother as soon as Joffy and Friday had gone. "As you probably guessed, he's been having trouble with Nelson again. He often comes home simply *reeking* of cordite, and I'm *really* not keen on him hanging around with that Emma Hamilton woman."

My father was a sort of time-traveling knight errant. He used to be a member of SO-12, the agency charged with policing the time lines: the ChronoGuard. He resigned due to differences over the way the historical time line was managed and went rogue. The ChronoGuard decided that he was too dangerous and eradicated him by a well-timed knock at the door during the night of his conception; my aunt April was born instead.

"So Nelson died at the Battle of Trafalgar?" I asked, recalling Dad's previous problems in the time line.

"Yes," she replied, "but I'm not sure he was meant to. That's why your father *says* he has to work so closely with Emma."

Emma, of course, was Lady Emma Hamilton, Nelson's consort. It was she who had alerted my father to Nelson's eradication. One moment she had been married to Lord Nelson for more than ten years, the next she was a bankrupt lush living in Calais. Must have been quite a shock. My mother leaned closer.

"Between the two of us, I'm beginning to think Emma's a bit of a tram--Emma! How nice of you to join us!"

At the doorway was a tall, red-faced woman wearing a brocade dress that had seen better days. Despite the rigors of a lengthy and damaging acquaintance with the bottle, there were the remains of great beauty and charm about her. She must have been dazzling in her youth.

"Hello, Lady Hamilton," I said, getting up to shake her hand. "How's the husband?"

"Still dead."

"Mine, too."

"Bummer."

"Ah!" I exclaimed, wondering quite where Lady Hamilton had picked up the word, although on reflection she probably knew a few worse. "This is Hamlet."

"Emma Hamilton," she cooed, casting an eye in the direction of the unquestionably handsome Dane and giving him her hand. "Lady."

"Hamlet," he replied, kissing her proffered hand. "Prince."

Her eyelashes fluttered momentarily. "A Prince? Of anywhere I'd know?"

"Denmark, as it happens."

"My . . . *late* boyfriend bombarded Copenhagen quite mercilessly in 1801. He said the Danes put up a good fight."

"We Danes like a tussle, Lady Hamilton," replied the Prince with a great deal of charm, "although I'm not from Copenhagen myself. A little town up the coast--Elsinore. We have a castle there. Not very large. Barely sixty rooms and a garrison of under two hundred. A bit bleak in the winter."

"Haunted?"

"One that I know of. What did your *late* boyfriend do when he wasn't bombarding Danes?"

"Oh, nothing much," she said offhandedly. "Fighting the French and the Spanish, leaving body parts around Europe--it was quite de rigueur at the time."

There was a pause as they stared at one another. Emma started to fan herself.

"Goodness!" she murmured. "All this talk of body parts has made me quite hot!"

"Right!" said my mother, jumping to her feet. "That's it! I'm not having this sort of smutty innuendo in my house!"

Hamlet and Emma looked startled at her outburst, but I managed to pull her aside and whisper, "Mother! Don't be so judgmental--after all, they're both single. And Hamlet's interest in Emma might take *her* interest off someone else."

"Someone . . . else?"

You could almost hear the cogs going around in her head. After a long pause, she took a deep breath, turned back to them and smiled broadly.

"My dears, why don't you have a walk in the garden? There is a gentle cooling breeze and the *niche d'amour* in the rose garden is very attractive this time of year."

"A good time for a drink, perhaps?" asked Emma hopefully.

"Perhaps," replied my mother, who was obviously trying to keep Lady Hamilton away from the bottle.

Emma didn't reply. She just offered her arm to Hamlet, who took it graciously and was going to steer her out of the open doors to the patio when Emma stopped him with a murmur of "not the *French* windows" and took him out by way of the kitchen.

"As I was saying," said my mother as she sat down, "Emma's a lovely girl. Cake?"

"Please."

"Here," she said, handing me the knife, "help yourself."

"Tell me," I began as I cut the Battenberg carefully, "did Landen come back?"

"That's your eradicated husband, isn't it?" she replied kindly. "No, I'm afraid he didn't." She smiled encouragingly. "You should come to one of my Eradications Anonymous evenings--we're meeting tomorrow night."

In common with my mother, I had a husband whose reality had been scrubbed from the here and now. Unlike my mother, whose husband still returned every so often from the timestream, I had a husband, Landen, who existed only in my dreams and recollections. No one else had any memories or knowledge of him at all. Mum knew about Landen because I'd told her. To anyone else, Landen's parents included, I was suffering some bizarre delusion. But Friday's father was Landen, despite his nonexistence, in the same way that my brothers and I had been born, despite my father's not existing. Time travel is like that. Full of unexplainable paradoxes.

"I'll get him back," I mumbled.

"Who?"



"Landen."

Joffy reappeared from the garden with Friday, who, in common with most toddlers, didn't see why adults couldn't give airplane rides all day. I gave him a slice of Battenberg, which he dropped in his eagerness to devour. The usually torpid DH-82 opened an eye, darted in, ate the cake and was asleep again in under three seconds.

"Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet!" Friday cried indignantly.

"Yes, it was impressive, wasn't it?" I agreed. "Bet you never saw Pickwick move that fast--even for a marshmallow."

"Nostrud laboris nisi et commodo *consequat*," replied Friday with great indignation. "Excepteur sint cupidatat non proident!"

"Serves you right," I told him. "Here, have a cucumber sandwich."

"What did my grandson say?" asked my mother, staring at Friday, who was trying to eat the sandwich all in one go and making a nauseating spectacle of himself.

"Oh, that's just him jabbering away in Lorem Ipsum. He speaks nothing else."

"Lorem--what?"

"Lorem Ipsum. It's dummy text used by the printing and typesetting industry to demonstrate layout. I don't know where he picked it up. Comes from living inside books, I should imagine."

"I see," said my mother, not seeing at all.

"How are the cousins?" I asked.

"Wilbur and Orville both run Mycrotech these days," answered Joffy as he passed me a cup of tea. "They made a few mistakes while Uncle Mycroft was away, but I think he's got them on a short leash now."

Wilbur and Orville were were my aunt and uncle's two sons. Despite having two of the most brilliant parents around, they were almost solid mahogany from the neck up.

"Pass the sugar, would you? A few mistakes?"

"Quite a lot, actually. Remember Mycroft's memory-erasure machine?"

"Yes and no."

"Well, they opened a chain of High Street erasure centers called

Mem-U-Gon. You could go in and have unpleasant memories removed."

"Lucrative, I should imagine."

"*Extremely* lucrative--right up to the moment they made their first mistake. Which was, considering those two, not an *if* but a *when*."

"Dare I ask what happened?"

"I think that it was the equivalent of setting a vacuum cleaner to 'blow' by accident. A certain Mrs. Worthing went into the Swindon branch of Mem-U-Gon to remove every single recollection of her failed first marriage."

"And . . . ?"

"Well, she was accidentally *uploaded* with the unwanted memories of seventy-two one-night stands, numerous drunken arguments, fifteen wasted lives and almost a thousand episodes of *Name That Fruit!* She was going to sue but settled instead for the name and address of one of the men whose exploits is now lodged in her memory. As far as I know, they married."

"I like a story with a happy ending," put in my mother.

"In any event," continued Joffy, "Mycroft forbade them from using it again and gave them the Chameleocar to market. It should be in the showrooms quite soon--if Goliath hasn't pinched the idea first."

"Ah!" I muttered, taking another bite of cake. "And how is my least favorite multinational?"

Joffy rolled his eyes. "Up to no good as usual. They're attempting to switch to a faith-based corporate-management system."

"Becoming a . . . religion?"

"Announced only last month on the suggestion of their own corporate precog, Sister Bettina of Stroud. They aim to switch the corporate hierarchy to a multideity plan with their own gods, demigods, priests, places of worship and official prayer book. In the *new* Goliath, employees will not be paid with anything as un-spiritual as money, but *faith*--in the form of coupons that can be exchanged for goods and services at any Goliath-owned store. Anyone holding Goliath shares will have these exchanged on favorable terms with these 'foupons' and everyone gets to worship the Goliath upper echelons."

"And what do the 'devotees' get in return?"

"Well, a warm sense of belonging, protection from the world's evils and a reward in the afterlife--oh, and I think there's a T-shirt in it somewhere, too."

"That sounds very Goliath-like."

"Doesn't it just?" Joffy smiled. "Worshipping in the hallowed halls of consumerland. The more you spend, the closer to their 'god' you become."

"Hideous!" I exclaimed. "Is there any *good* news?"

"Of course! The Swindon Mallets are going to beat the Reading Whackers to win the SuperHoop this year."

"You've *got* to be kidding!"

"Not at all. Swindon winning the 1988 SuperHoop is the subject of the incomplete Seventh Revealment of St. Zvlkx. It goes like this: 'There will be a home win on the playing fields of Swindonne in nineteen hundred and eighty eight, and in consequence of . . .' The rest is missing, but it's pretty unequivocal."

St. Zvlkx was Swindon's very own saint, and no child educated here could fail to know about him, including me. His Revealments had been the subject of much conjecture over the years, for good reason--they were uncannily accurate. Even so, I was skeptical--especially if it meant the Swindon Mallets' winning the SuperHoop. The city's team, despite a surprise appearance at the SuperHoop finals a few years back and the undeniable talents of team captain Roger Kapok, was probably the worst side in the country.

"That's a bit of a long shot, isn't it? I mean, St. Zvlkx vanished in, what--1292?"

But Joffy and my mother didn't think it very funny.

"Yes," said Joffy, "but we can ask him to confirm it."

"You can? How?"

"According to his Revealment the Sixth, he's due for spontaneous resurrection at ten past nine the day after tomorrow."

"But that's remarkable!"

"Remarkable but *not* unprecedented," replied Joffy. "Thirteenth-century seers have been popping up all over the place. Eighteen in the

last six months. Zvlkx will be of interest to the faithful and us at the Brotherhood, but the TV networks probably won't cover it. The ratings of Brother Velobius' second coming last week didn't even come close to beating *Bonzo the Wonder Hound* reruns on the other channel."

I thought about this for a moment in silence.

"That's enough about Swindon," said my mother, who had a nose for gossip--especially mine. "What's been happening to you?"

"How long have you got? What I've been getting up to would fill several books."

"Then . . . let's start with why you're back."

So I explained about the pressures of being the head of Jurisfiction, and just how annoying books could be sometimes, and Friday, and Landen, and Yorrick Kaine's fictional roots. On hearing this, Joffy jumped.

"Kaine is . . . fictional?"

I nodded. "Why the interest? Last time I was here, he was a washed-up ex-member of the Whig Party."

"He's not now. Which book is he from?"

I shrugged. "I wish I knew. Why? What's going on?"

Joffy and Mum exchanged nervous glances. When my mother gets interested in politics, it means things are really bad.

"Something is rotten in the state of England," murmured my mother.

"And that something is the English *Chancellor* Yorrick Kaine," added Joffy, "but don't take our word for it. He's appearing on ToadNewsNetwork's *Evade the Question Time* here in Swindon at eight tonight. We'll go and see him for ourselves."

I told them more about Jurisfiction, and Joffy, in return, cheerfully reported that attendance at the Global Standard Deity church was up since he had accepted sponsorship from the Toast Marketing Board, a company that seemed to have doubled in size and influence since I was here last. They had spread their net beyond hot bread and now included jams, croissants and pastries in their portfolio of holdings. My mother, not to be outdone, told me she'd received a little bit of sponsorship money herself from Mr. Rudyard's Cakes, although she privately admitted that the Battenberg she served up was actually her

own. She then told me in great detail about her aged friends' medical operations, which I can't say I was overjoyed to hear about, and as she drew breath in between Mrs. Stripling's appendectomy and Mr. Walsh's "plumbing" problems, a tall and imposing figure walked into the room. He was dressed in a fine morning coat of eighteenth-century vintage, wore an impressive mustache that would have put Commander Bradshaw's to shame and had an imperiousness and sense of purpose that reminded me of Emperor Zhark. "Thursday," announced my mother in a breathless tone, "this is the Prussian Chancellor, Herr Otto Bismarck--your father and I are trying to sort out the Schleswig-Holstein question of 1863-64; he's gone to fetch Bismarck's opposite number from Denmark so they can talk. Otto--I mean, Herr Bismarck, this is my daughter, Thursday."

Bismarck clicked his heels and kissed my hand in an icily polite manner.

"Fraulein Next, the pleasure is all mine," he intoned in a heavy German accent.

My mother's curious and usually long-dead houseguests should have surprised me, but they didn't. Not anymore. Not since Alexander the Great turned up when I was nine. Nice enough fellow--but shocking table manners.

"So, how are you enjoying 1988, Herr Bismarck?"

"I am especially taken with the concept of dry cleaning," replied the Prussian, "and I see big things ahead for the gasoline engine." He turned back to my mother: "But I am most eager to speak to the Danish prime minister. Where might he be?"

"I think we're having a teensy-weensy bit of trouble locating him," replied my mother, waving the cake knife. "Would you care for a slice of Battenberg instead?"

"Ah!" replied Bismarck, his demeanor softening. He stepped delicately over DH-82 to sit next to my mother. "The finest Battenberg I have ever tasted!"

"Oh, Herr B," said my flustered mother. "You do flatter me so!"

She made shooing motions at us out of vision of Bismarck and, obedient children that we were, we withdrew from the living room.

"Well!" said Joffy as we shut the door. "How about that? Mum's after a bit of Teutonic slap and tickle!"

I raised an eyebrow and stared at him.

"I hardly think so, Joff. Dad doesn't turn up that often and intelligent male company can be hard to find."

Joffy chuckled.

"Just good friends, eh? Okay. Here's the deal: I'll bet you a tenner Mum and the Iron Chancellor are doing the wild thing by this time next week."

"Done."

We shook hands and with Emma, Hamlet, Bismarck and my mother thus engaged, I asked Joffy to look after Friday so I could slip out of the house to get some air.

I turned left and wandered up Marlborough Road, looking about at the changes that two years' absence had wrought. I had walked this way to school for almost eight years, and every wall and tree and house was as familiar to me as an old friend. A new hotel had gone up on Piper's Way, and a few shops in the Old Town had either changed hands or been updated. It all felt very familiar, and I wondered whether the feeling of wanting to belong somewhere would stay with me or fade, like my fondness for *Caversham Heights*, the book in which I had made my home these past few years.

I walked down Bath Road, took a right and found myself in the street where Landen and I had lived before he was eradicated. I had returned home one afternoon to find his mother and father in residence. Since they hadn't known who I was and considered--not unreasonably--that I was dangerously insane, I decided to play it safe today and just walk past slowly on the other side of the street.

Nothing looked very different. A tub of withered *Tickia orologica* was still on the porch next to an old pogo stick, and the curtains in the windows were certainly his mother's. I walked on, then retraced my steps and returned, my resolve to get him back mixed with a certain fatalism that perhaps ultimately I wouldn't and the thought that I should prepare myself. After all, he *had* died when he was two years old, and I had no memories of how it had been, but only of how things *might* have turned out had he lived.

I shrugged my shoulders and chastised myself upon the morbidity of my own thoughts, then walked towards the Goliath Twilight Homes, where my gran was staying these days.

Granny Next was in her room watching a nature documentary called *Walking with Ducks* when I was shown in by the nurse. Gran was wearing a blue gingham nightie, had wispy gray hair and looked all of

her 110 years. She had got it into her head that she couldn't shuffle off this mortal coil until she had read the ten most boring books, but since "boring" was about as impossible to quantify as "not boring," it was difficult to know how to help.

"Shhh!" she muttered as soon as I walked in. "This program's *fascinating!*" She was staring at the TV screen earnestly. "Just think," she went on, "by analyzing the bones of the extinct duck *Anas platyrhynchos*, they can actually figure out how it walked."

I stared at the small screen where an odd animated bird waddled strangely in a backwards direction as the narrator explained just how they had managed to deduce such a thing.

"How could they know that just by looking at a few old bones?" I asked doubtfully, having learned my lesson long ago that an "expert" was usually anything but.

"Scoff not, young Thursday," replied Gran. "A panel of expert avian paleontologists have even deduced that a duck's call might have sounded something like this: 'Quock, quock.'"

"'Quock'? Hardly seems likely."

"Perhaps you're right," she replied, switching off the TV and tossing the remote aside. "What do experts know?"

Like me, Gran was able to jump inside fiction. I wasn't sure how either of us did it, but I was very glad that she could--it was she who helped me not to forget my husband, something at one time I was in a clear and real danger of doing thanks to Aornis, the mnemonomorph, of course. But Gran had left me about a year ago, announcing that I could fend for myself and she wouldn't waste any more time laboring for me hand and foot, which was a bit of cheek really, as I generally looked after *her*. But no matter. She was my gran, and I loved her a great deal.

"Goodness!" I said, looking at her soft and wrinkled skin, which put me oddly in mind of a baby echidna I had once seen in *National Geographic*.

"What?" she asked sharply.

"Nothing."

"Nothing? You were thinking of how old I was looking, weren't you?"

It was hard to deny it. Every time I saw her, I felt she couldn't look

any older, but the next time, with startling regularity, she did.

"When did you get back?"

"This morning."

"And how are you finding things?"

I brought her up to date with current events. She made "tuttutting" noises when I told her about Hamlet and Lady Hamilton, then even louder "tut-tut" noises when I mentioned my mother and Bismarck.

"Risky business, that."

"Mum and Bismarck?"

"Emma and Hamlet."

"He's fictional and she's historical--what could be wrong about that?"

"I was thinking," she said slowly, raising an eyebrow, "about what would happen if Ophelia found out."

I hadn't thought of that, and she was right. Hamlet could be difficult, but Ophelia was impossible.

"I always thought the reason Sir John Falstaff retired from policing Elizabethan drama was to get away from Ophelia's sometimes unreasonable demands," I mused, "such as having petting animals and a goodly supply of mineral water and fresh sushi on hand at Elsinore whenever she was working. Do you think I should insist Hamlet return to *Hamlet*?"

"Perhaps not right away," said Gran, coughing into her hanky. "Let him see what the real world is like. Might do him good to realize it needn't take five acts to make up one's mind."

She started coughing again, so I called the nurse, who told me I should probably leave her. I kissed her good-bye and walked out of the rest home deep in thought, trying to work up a strategy for the next few days. I dreaded to think what my overdraft was like, and if I was to catch Kaine I'd be better off inside SpecOps than outside. There were no two ways about it: I needed my old job back. I'd attempt that tomorrow and take it from there. Kaine certainly needed dealing with, and I'd play it by ear at the TV studios tonight. I'd probably have to find a speech therapist for Friday to try to wean him off the Lorem Ipsum, and then, of course, there was Landen. How do I even begin to get someone returned to the here-and-now after they were deleted



from the there-and-then by a chronupt official from the supposedly incorruptible ChronoGuard.

I was jolted from my thoughts as I approached Mum's house. There appeared to be someone partially hidden from view in the alleyway opposite. I nipped into the nearest front garden, ran between the houses, across two back gardens and then stood on a dustbin to peak cautiously over a high wall. I was right. There was someone watching my mother's house. He was dressed too warmly for summer and was half hidden in the buddleia. My foot slipped on the dustbin, and I made a noise. The lurker looked around, saw me and took flight. I jumped over the wall and gave chase. It was easier than I thought. He wasn't terribly fit, and I caught up with him as he tried rather pathetically to climb a wall. Pulling the man down, I upset his small duffel bag, and out poured an array of battered notebooks, a camera, a small pair of binoculars and several copies of the *SpecOps-27 Gazette*, much annotated in red pen.

"Ow, ow, ow, get off!" he said. "You're hurting!"

I twisted his arm, and he dropped to his knees. I was just patting his pockets for a weapon when another man, dressed not unlike the first, came charging out from behind an abandoned car, holding aloft a tree branch. I spun, dodged the blow, and as the second man's momentum carried him on, I pushed him hard with my foot, and he slammed headfirst into a wall and collapsed unconscious.

The first man was unarmed, so I made sure his unconscious friend was also unarmed--and wasn't going to choke on his blood or teeth or something.

"I know you're not SpecOps," I observed, "because you're both way too crap. Goliath?"

The first man got slowly to his feet and was looking curiously at me, rubbing his arm where I had twisted it. He was a big man, but not an unkindly-looking one. He had short dark hair and a large mole on his chin. I had broken his spectacles; he didn't look Goliath, but I had been wrong before.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Miss Next. I've been waiting for you for a long long time."

"I've been away."

"Since January 1986. I've waited nearly two and a half years to see

you."

"And why would you do a thing like that?"

"Because," said the man, producing an identity badge from his pocket and handing it over, "I am your officially sanctioned *stalker*."

I looked at the badge. It was true enough; he was allocated to me. All 100 percent legit, and I didn't have a say in it. The whole stalker thing was licensed by SpecOps-33, the Entertainments Facilitation Department, who had drawn up specific rules with the Amalgamated Union of Stalkers as to who is allowed to stalk whom. It helps to regulate a historically dark business and also grades stalkers according to skill and perseverance. My stalker was an impressive Grade-1, the sort who are permitted to stalk the really big celebrities. And that made me suspicious.

"A Grade-1?" I queried. "Should I be flattered? I don't suppose I'm anything above a Grade-8."

"Not nearly that high," agreed my stalker. "More like a Grade- 12. But I've got a hunch you're going to get bigger. I latched on to Lola Vavoom in the sixties when she was just a bit part in *The Streets of Wootton Bassett* and stalked her for nineteen years, man and boy. I only gave her up to move on to Buck Stallion. When she heard, she sent me a glass tankard with THANK YOU FOR A GREAT STALK, LOLA etched onto it. Have you ever met her?"

"Once, Mr. . . ." I looked at the pass before handing it back. "De Floss. Interesting name. Any relation to Candice?"

"The author? In my dreams," replied the stalker, rolling his eyes. "But since I'd like us to be friends, do please call me Millon."

"Millon it is, then."

And we shook hands. The man on the ground moaned and sat up, rubbing his head.

"Who's your friend?"

"He's not my friend," said Millon, "he's my stalker. And a pain in the arse he is, too."

"Wait--you're a stalker and you have a stalker?"

"Of course!" laughed Millon. "Ever since I published my autobiography, *A Stalk on the Wild Side*, I've become a bit of a celebrity myself. I even have a sponsorship deal with Compass

Rose™ duffel coats. It is *my* celebrity status that enables Adam here to stalk *me*. Come to think of it, he's a Grade-3 stalker, so it's possible he's got a stalker of his own--haven't you heard the poem?"

Before I could stop him, he started to recite:

*". . . And so the tabloids do but say,  
that stalkers on other stalkers prey,  
and these have smaller stalkers to stalk 'em  
and so proceed, ad infinitum. . . ."*

"No, I hadn't heard that one," I mused as the second stalker placed a handkerchief to his bleeding lip.

"Miss Next, this is Adam Gnusense. Adam, Miss Next."

He waved weakly at me, looked at the bloodied handkerchief and sighed mournfully. I felt rather remorseful all of a sudden.

"Sorry to hit you, Mr. Gnusense, " I said apologetically. "I didn't know what either of you were up to."

"Occupational hazard, Miss Next."

"Hey, Adam," said Millon, suddenly sounding enthusiastic, "do you have your own stalker yet?"

"Somewhere," said Gnusense looking around, "a Grade-34 loser. The sad bastard was rummaging through my bins last night. Passe or what!"

"Kids--tsk," said Millon. "It might have been de rigueur in the sixties, but the modern stalker is much more subtle. Long vigils, copious notes, timed entry and exits, telephoto lenses."

"We live in sad times," agreed Adam, shaking his head sadly. "Must be off. I said I'd keep a close eye on Adrian Lush for a friend."

He stood up and shambled slowly away down the alley, stumbling on discarded beer cans.

"Not a great talker is old Adam," said Millon in a whisper, "but sticks to his target like a limpet. You wouldn't catch him rummaging through dustbins--unless he was giving a master class for a few of the young pups, of course. Tell me, Miss Next, but where have you been for the past two and a half years? It's been a bit dull here--after the first eighteen months of you not showing up, I'd reduced my stalking to only three nights a week."

"You'd never believe me."

"You'd be surprised what I can believe. Aside from stalking I've just finished my new book, *A Short History of the Special Operations Network*. I'm also editor of *Conspiracy Theorist* magazine. In between pieces on the very tangible link between Goliath and Yorrick Kaine and the existence of a mysterious beast known only as Guinzilla, we've run several articles devoted entirely to you and that *Jane Eyre* thing. We'd love to do a piece on your uncle Mycroft's work, too. Even though we know almost nothing, the conspiracy network is alive with healthy half-truths, lies and supposition. Did he really build an LCD cloaking device for cars?"

"Sort of."

"And translating carbon paper?"

"He called it rossetionery."

"And what about the Ovinator? *Conspiracy Theorist* devotes several pages of unsubstantiated rumors to this one invention alone."

"I don't know. Some sort of machine for cooking eggs, perhaps? Is there anything you *don't* know about my family?"

"Not a lot. I'm thinking of writing a biography about you. How about *Thursday Next: A Biography*?"

"The title? Way too imaginative."

"So I have your permission?"

"No, but if you can put a dossier together on Yorrick Kaine, I'll tell you all about Aornis Hades."

"Acheron's little sister? It's a deal! Are you sure I can't write your biography? I've already made a start."

"Positive. If you find anything, knock on my door."

"I can't. There's a blanket restraining order on all members of the Amalgamated Union of Stalkers. We're not allowed within a hundred yards of your place of residence."

I sighed. "All right, just wave when I come out."

De Floss readily agreed to that plan, and I left him rearranging his notebook, binoculars and camera and starting to make copious notes on his first encounter with me. I couldn't get rid of the poor deluded fool, but a stalker just might--*might*--be an ally.

## *Evade the Question Time*

### **Perfidious Danes "Historically Our Enemy," Claims Insane Historian**

"Quite frankly, I was yim-pim-pim appalled," said England's leading mad history scholar yesterday. "The eighth-century Danish attack on our flibble-flooble sceptered isle is a story of invasion, subjugation, plunder and exploitation that would remain bleep-bleep-baaaaa unequaled until we tried it ourselves many years later." The confused and barely coherent historian's work has been authenticated by another equally feeble-minded academic who told us yesterday, "The Danish invasion began in 786 when the Danes set up a kingdom in East Anglia. They didn't even use their own names either. They preferred to do their brutal work cowardly hiding beneath the pseudonyms of Angles, Bruts and Flynnns." Further research has shown that the Danes stayed for over four hundred years and were driven home only by the crusading help of our new close friends the French.

Article in *The New Oppressor*,  
the official mouthpiece of the Whig Party

How did Kaine rise so quickly to power?" I asked incredulously as Joffy and I queued patiently outside Swindon's ToadNewsNetwork studios that evening. "When I was here last, Kaine and the Whig Party were all but washed up after the *Cardenio* debacle."

Joffy looked grim and nodded towards a large crowd of uniformed Kaine followers who were waiting in silence for their glorious leader.

"Things haven't been good back here, Thurs. Kaine regained his seat after Samuel Pring was assassinated. The Whigs formed an alliance with the Liberals and elected Kaine as their leader. He has some sort of magnetism, and the numbers that attend his rallies increase all the time. His 'British unification' stance has had much support--mostly

with stupid people who can't be bothered to think for themselves."

"War with Wales?"

"He hasn't said as such, but a leopard doesn't change its spots. He won by a landslide after the previous government collapsed over the 'cash for llamas' scandal. As soon as he was in power he proclaimed himself chancellor. His Unreform Act last year restricted the vote to people with property."

"How did he get parliament to agree to *that*?" I muttered, aghast at the thought of it.

"We're not sure," said Joffy sadly. "Sometimes parliament does the funniest things. But he's not happy just being chancellor. He's arguing that committees and accountants only slow things down, and if people *really* want trains to run on time and shopping trolleys to run straight, it could be done only by one man wielding unquestionable executive power--a dictator."

"So what's stopping him?"

"The President," replied Joffy quietly. "Formby has told Kaine that if Kaine pushes for a dictatorial election, he will stand against him, and Yorrick knows full well that Formby would win--he's as popular now as he ever was."

I thought for a moment. "How old is President Formby?"

"That's the problem. He was eighty-four last May."

We fell silent for a moment and shuffled with the queue up to the stage door, had our identities checked by two ugly men from SO-6 and were then ushered in. We took our seats at the back and waited patiently for the show to begin. It seemed hard to believe that Kaine had managed to inveigle his way to the top of English politics, but, I reflected, anything can happen to a fictional character--a trait that Yorrick had obviously exploited to the full.

"See that nasty-looking man on the edge of the stage?" asked Joffy.

"Yes," I replied, following Joffy's finger to a stocky man with short hair and no visible neck.

"Colonel Fawsten Gayle, Kaine's head of security. Not a man to trifle with. It's rumored he was expelled from school for nailing his head to a park bench on a bet."

Standing next to Gayle was a cadaverous man with pinched features

and small round spectacles. He was holding a battered red briefcase and was dressed in a rumpled sports jacket and corduroy trousers.

"Who's that?"

"Ernst Stricknene. Kaine's personal adviser."

I stared at them both for a while and noticed that, despite being barely two feet from each other, they didn't exchange a single word or look. Things in the Kaine camp were far from settled. If I could get close, I'd just grab Yorrick and jump him straight to one of Jurisfiction's many prison books, and that would be that. It looked as though I had got back home just in time.

I consulted the complimentary copy of *The New Oppressor* I had found on my seat.

"Why is Kaine blaming the nation's woes on the Danish?" I asked.

"Because economically we're in a serious mess after losing to Russia in the Crimean War. They didn't just get Tunbridge Wells as war reparations but a huge chunk of cash, too. The country is near bankruptcy, Kaine wants to stay in power, so--"

"Misdirection."

"Bingo. He blames someone else."

"But the *Danish*?"

"Shows how desperate he is, doesn't it? As a nation we've been blaming the Welsh and the French for far too long and with the Russians out of the frame he's come up with Denmark as public enemy number one. He's using the Viking raids of 800 A.D. and the Danish rule of England in the eleventh century as an excuse to whip up some misinformed xenophobia."

"Ludicrous!"

"Agreed. The papers have been full of anti-Danish propaganda this past month. All Bang & Olufsen entertainment systems have been withdrawn due to 'safety' concerns, and Lego has been banned pending 'choking hazard' investigations. The list of outlawed Danish writers is becoming longer by the second. Kierkegaard's works have already been declared illegal under the Undesirable Danish Literature Act and will be burnt. Hans Christian Andersen will be next, we're told--and after that maybe even Karen Blixen."

"They can pull my copy of *Out of Africa* from my cold, dead fingers."

"Mine, too. You'd better make sure Hamlet doesn't tell anyone where he's from. Shhh. I think something's happening."

Something *was* happening. The floor manager had walked out onto the set and was explaining to us exactly what we should do. After a protracted series of technical checks, the host of the show walked on, to applause from the audience. This was Tudor Webastow of *The Owl*, who had made a career out of being *just* inquisitive enough to be considered a realistic political foil for the press but not *so* inquisitive that he would be found in the Thames wearing concrete overshoes.

He sat down at the center of a table with two empty chairs either side of him and sorted his notes. Unusually for *Evade the Question Time*, the show had two speakers instead of four, but tonight was special: Yorrick Kaine would be facing his political opposition, Mr. Redmond van de Poste, of the Commonsense Party. Mr. Webastow cleared his throat and began.

"Good evening and welcome to *Evade the Question Time*, the nation's premier topical talk show. Tonight, as every night, a panel of distinguished public figures generally evade answering the audience's questions and instead toe the party line."

There was applause at this, and Webastow continued: "The show tonight comes from Swindon in Wessex. Sometimes called the third capital of England or ' Venice on the M4,' the Swindon of today is a financial and manufacturing powerhouse, its citizens a cross-section of professionals and artists who are politically indicative of the country as a whole. I'd also like to mention at this point that *Evade the Question Time* is brought to you by Neat-Fit<sup>(r)</sup> Exhaust Systems, the tailpipe of choice."

He paused for a moment and shuffled his papers.

"We are honored to have with us tonight two very different speakers from opposite ends of the political spectrum. First I would like to introduce a man who was politically dead two years ago but has managed to pull himself up to the second-highest political office in the nation, with a devoted following of many millions, not all of whom are deranged. Ladies and gentlemen, Chancellor Yorrick Kaine!"

There was mixed applause when he walked onto the stage, and he grinned and nodded for the benefit of the crowd. I leaned forward in my seat. He didn't appear to have aged at all in the two years since I had last seen him, which is what I would expect from a fictioneer. Still looking in his late twenties, with black hair swept neatly to the side, he might have been a male model from a knitting pattern. I knew he



wasn't. I'd checked.

"Thank you very much," said Kaine, sitting at the table and clasping his hands in front of him. "May I say that I always regard Swindon as a home away from home."

There was a brief twitter of delight from the front of the audience, mostly little old ladies who looked upon him as the son they never had.

Mr. Webastow went on, "And opposing him we are also honored to welcome Mr. Redmond van de Poste of the opposition Commonsense Party."

There was notably less applause as van de Poste walked in. He was older than Kaine by almost thirty years, looked tired and gaunt, wore round horn-rimmed spectacles and had a high-domed forehead that shone when it caught the light. He looked about furtively before sitting down stiffly. I guessed the reason. He was wearing a heavy flak vest beneath his suit--and with good reason. The last three Commonsense leaders had all met with mysterious deaths. The previous incumbent had been Mrs. Fay Bentoss, who had died after being hit by a car. Not so unusual, you might think--except she had been in her front room when it happened.

"Thank you, gentlemen, and welcome. The first question comes from Miss Pupkin."

A small woman stood up and said shyly, "Hello. A Terrible Thing was done by Somebody this week, and I'd like to ask the panel if they condemn this."

"A very good question," replied Webastow. "Mr. Kaine, perhaps you'd like to start the ball rolling?"

"Thank you, Tudor. Yes, I condemn utterly and completely the Terrible Thing in the strongest possible terms. We in the Whig Party are appalled by the way in which Terrible Things are done in this great nation of ours, with no retribution against the Somebody who did them. I would also like to point out that the current spate of Terrible Things being undertaken in our towns and cities is a burden we inherited from the Commonsense Party, and I am at pains to point out that in real terms the occurrence of Terrible Things has dropped by over twenty-eight percent since we took office."

There was applause at this, and Webastow then asked Mr. van de Poste for his comments.

"Well," said Redmond with a sigh, "quite clearly my learned friend has got his facts mixed up. According to the way we massage the figures, Terrible Things are actually on the increase. But I'd like to stop playing party politics for a moment and state for the record that although this is of course a great personal tragedy for those involved, condemning out of hand these acts does not allow us to understand why they occur, and more needs to be done to get to the root cause of--"

"Yet again," interrupted Kaine, "yet again we see the Commonsense Party shying away from its responsibilities and failing to act toughly on unspecified difficulties. I hope all the unnamed people who have suffered unclearly defined problems will understand--"

"I *did* say we condemned the Terrible Thing," put in van de Poste. "And I might add that we have been conducting a study into the entire range of Terrible Things, all the way from Just Annoying to Outrageously Awful, and will act on these findings--if we gain power."

"Trust the Commonsensers to do things by half measures!" scoffed Kaine, who obviously enjoyed these sorts of discussions. "By going only so far as 'Outrageously Awful,' Mr. van de Poste is selling his own nation short. We at the Whig Party have been looking at the Terrible Things problem and propose a zero-tolerance attitude to offenses as low as Mildly Inappropriate. Only in this way can the Somebodies who commit Terrible Things be stopped before they move on to acts that are Obscenely Perverse."

There was a smattering of applause again, presumably as the audience tried to figure out whether "Just Annoying" was worse than "Mildly Inappropriate."

"Succinctly put," announced Webastow. "At the end of the first round, I will award three points to Mr. Kaine for an excellent nonspecific condemnation, plus one bonus point for blaming the previous government and another for successfully mutating the question to promote the party line. Mr. van de Poste gets a point for a firm rebuttal, but only two points for his condemnation, as he tried to inject an impartial and intelligent observation. So at the end of the first round, it's Kaine leading with five points and van de Poste with three."

There was more applause as the numbers came up on the scoreboard.

"On to the next stage of the show, which we call the 'not answering the question' round. We have a question from Miss Ives."

A middle-aged woman put up her hand and asked, "Does the panel think that sugar should be added to rhubarb pie or the sweetness deficit made up by an additive, such as custard?"

"Thank you, Miss Ives. Mr. van de Poste, would you care to not answer this question first?"

"Well," said Redmond, eyeing the audience for any possible assassins, "this question goes straight to the heart of government, and I'd like to first point out that the Commonsense Party, when we were in power, tried more ways of doing things than any other party in living memory, and in consequence came closer to doing the right way of doing something, even if we didn't know it at the time."

There was applause, and Joffy and I exchanged looks.

"Does it get any better?" I whispered.

"Wait until they get on to Denmark."

"I utterly refute," began Kaine, "the implication that we aren't doing things the right way. To demonstrate this I'd like to wander completely off the point and talk about the Health Service overhaul that we will launch next year. We want to replace the outdated 'preventive' style of health care this country has relentlessly pursued with a 'wait until it gets really bad' system, which will target those most in need of medical treatment--the sick. Yearly health screenings for all citizens will end and be replaced by a 'tertiary' diagnostic regime that will save money and resources."

Again there was applause.

"Okay," announced Webastow, "I'm going to give van de Poste three points for successfully not answering that question at all, but five points to Kaine, who not only ignored the question but instead used it as a platform for his own political agenda. So with six rounds still to go, we have Kaine with ten points and van de Poste with six. Next question, please."

A young man with dyed red hair sitting in our row put his hand up. "I would like to suggest that the Danish are *not* our enemy, and this is nothing more than a cynical move by the Whigs to blame someone else for our own economic troubles."

"Ah!" said Webastow. "The controversial Danish question. I'm going to let Mr. van de Poste avoid this question first."

Van de Poste looked unwell all of a sudden and glanced nervously towards where Stricknene and Gayle were glaring at him.

"I think," he began slowly, "that if the Danish are as Mr. Kaine describes, I will offer my support to his policies."

He dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief as Kaine began: "When I came to power, England was a nation in the grip of economic decline and social ills. No one realized it at the time, and I took it upon myself to demonstrate by any means in my power the depths to which this great nation had fallen. With the support of my followers, I have managed to demonstrate reasonably clearly that things aren't as good as we thought they were, and what we imagined was peace and coexistence with our neighbors was actually a fool's paradise of delusion and paranoia. Anyone who thinks . . ."

I leaned over to Joffy. "Do people believe this garbage?"

"I'm afraid so. I think he's working on the 'people will far more readily believe a big lie than a small one' principle. Still surprises me, though."

". . . whoever disturbs this mission," rattled on Kaine, "is an enemy of the people, whether they be Danish or Welsh sympathizers, eager to overthrow our nation, or ill-informed lunatics who do not deserve the vote or a voice."

There was applause, but a few boos, too. I saw Colonel Gayle make notes on a scrap of paper as to who was shouting them, counting out the seat numbers as he did so.

"But why the Danish?" continued the man with the red hair. "They have a notoriously fair system of parliament, an impeccable record of human rights and a deserved reputation of upstanding charitable works in Third World nations. I think these are lies, Mr. Kaine!"

There were gasps and intakes of breath, but a few head noddings, too. Even, I think, from van de Poste.

"For the moment, at least," began Kaine in a conciliatory tone, "everyone is permitted an opinion, and I thank our friend for his candor. However, I would like to bring the audience's attention to an unrelated yet emotive issue that will bring the discussion away from embarrassing shortcomings of my administration and back into the arena of populist politics. Namely: the disgraceful record of puppy and kitten death when the Commonsense Party was in power."

At the mention of puppies and kittens dying, there were cries of alarm from the elder members of the audience.

Confident that he had turned the discussion, Kaine went on, "As

things stand at the moment, over one thousand unwanted puppies and kittens are destroyed each year by lethal injections, which are freely available to veterinarians in Denmark. As committed humanitarians, the Whig Party has always condemned unwanted pet extermination."

"Mr. Van de Poste?" asked Webastow. "How do you react to Mr. Kaine's diversionary tactics regarding kitten death?"

"Clearly," began van de Poste, "kitten and puppy death is regrettable, but we in the Commonsense Party must bring it to everyone's attention that unwanted pets have to be destroyed in this manner. If people were more responsible with their pets, then this sort of thing wouldn't happen."

"Typical of the Commonsense approach!" barked Kaine. "Blaming the population as though they were feeble-minded fools with little personal responsibility! We in the Whig Party would never condone such an accusation and are appalled by Mr. van de Poste's outburst. I will personally pledge to you now that I will make the puppy-home-deficit problem my primary concern when I am made dictator."

There were loud cheers at this, and I shook my head sadly.

"Well," said Webastow happily, "I think I will give Mr. Kaine a full five points for his masterful misdirection, plus a bonus two points for obscuring the Danish issue rather than facing up to it. Mr. van de Poste, I'm sorry that I can only offer you a single point. Not only did you tacitly agree to Mr. Kaine's outrageous foreign policy, but you answered the unwanted-pet problem with an honest reply. So at the end of round three, Kaine is galloping ahead with seventeen points and van de Poste is bringing up the rear with seven. Our next question comes from Mr. Wedgwood."

"Yes," said a very old man in the third row, "I should like to know if the panel supports the Goliath Corporation's change to a faith-based corporate-management system."

And so it dragged on for nearly an hour, Kaine making outrageous claims and most of the audience failing to notice or, even worse, care. I was extremely glad when the program drew to a close, with Kaine leading thirty-eight points to van de Poste's sixteen, and we filed out of the door.

"What now?" asked Joffy.

I took my Jurisfiction TravelBook from my pocket and opened it at the page that offered a paragraph of *The Sword of the Zenobians*, one of the many unpublished works Jurisfiction used as a prison. All I had to

do was grab Kaine's hand and read.

"I'm going to take Kaine back to the BookWorld with me. He's far too dangerous to leave out here."

"I agree," said Joffy, leading me around to where two large limousines were waiting for the Chancellor. "He'll want to meet his 'adoring' public, so you should have a chance."

We found the crowd waiting for him and pushed our way to the front. Most of the TV audience had turned up to see Kaine, but probably not for the same purpose as I. There was excited chatter as Kaine appeared. He smiled serenely and walked down the line, shook hands and was presented with flowers and babies to kiss. Close by his side was Colonel Gayle, with a phalanx of guards who stared into the crowd to make sure no one would try anything. Behind them all, I could see Stricknene still clinging onto the red briefcase. I partially hid myself behind a Kaine acolyte waving a Whig Party flag so Kaine didn't see me. We had crossed swords once before, and he knew what I was capable of, much as I knew what *he* was capable of--the last time we met, he had tried to have us eaten by the Glatisant, a sort of hell beast from the depths of mankind's most depraved imagination. If he could conjure up fictional beasts at will, I would have to be more careful.

But then, as the small group moved closer, I started to feel a curious impulse not to trap Kaine but to join in with the infectious enthusiasm. The atmosphere was electric, and being swept along with the crowd was something that just suddenly seemed *right*. Joffy had fallen under the spell already and was waving and whistling his support. I fought down a strong feeling to stop what I was doing and perhaps give Yorrick the benefit of the doubt when he and his entourage were upon us. His hand came out towards the crowd. I steadied myself, glanced at the opening lines of *Zenobians* and waited for the right moment. I would have to hold on tight as I read our way into the BookWorld, but that didn't bother me, as I'd done it many times before. What did worry me was the fact that my resolve was softening even faster.

Before the Kaine magnetism could take me over any further, I took a deep breath, grabbed the outstretched hand and muttered quickly, "It was a time of peace within the land of the Zenobians. . . ."

It didn't take long for me to jump into the BookWorld. Within a few moments, the bustling nighttime crowd in the car park of ToadNewsNetwork studios had vanished from view, to be replaced by a warm, verdant valley where herds of unicorns grazed peacefully

under the summer sun. Grammasites wheeled in the blue skies, riding the thermals that rose from the warm grassland.

"So!" I said, turning to Kaine and receiving something of a shock. Beside me was not Yorrick but a middle-aged man holding a Whig Party flag and staring at the crystal-clear waters babbling through a gap in the rocks. I must have grabbed the wrong hand.

"Where am I?" asked the man, who was understandably confused.

"It's a near-death experience," I told him hastily. "What do you think?"

"It's beautiful!"

"Good. Don't get too fond of it. I'm taking you back."

I grasped him again, muttered the password under my breath and jumped out of fiction, something I had a lot less trouble with. We arrived behind some dustbins just as Kaine and his entourage were driving off. I ran up to Joffy, who was still waving good-bye, and told him to snap out of it.

"Sorry," he said, shaking his head. "What happened to you?"

"Don't ask. C'mon, let's go home."

We left the scene as a very excited and confused middle-aged man tried to tell anyone who would listen about his "near-death experience."

I went to bed past midnight, my head spinning from my experience of Kaine's almost hypnotic hold of the populace. Still, I wasn't out of ideas. I could try to grab him again and, failing that, use the eraserhead I had smuggled out of the BookWorld. Destroying him didn't bother me. I'd be no more guilty of murder than would an author with a delete key. But while Formby opposed him, Kaine would not become dictator, so I had a bit of time to work up a strategy. I could observe and plan. "Time spent doing renaissance," Mrs. Malaprop used to say, "is never wasted."

## A Town Like Swindon

### Formby Denies Kaine

President-for-Life George Formby vetoed Chancellor Kaine's attempts to make himself dictator of England yesterday during one of the most heated exchanges this nation has ever seen. Kaine's Ultimate Executive Power Bill, already passed by parliament, requires only the presidential signature to become law. President Formby, speaking from the presidential palace in Wigan, told reporters, "Eeee, I wouldn't have a \*\*\*\*\* like that run a grocer's, let alone a country!" Chancellor Kaine, angered by the President's remark, declared Formby "too old to have a say in this nation's future," "out of touch" and "a poor singer," the last of which he was forced to retract after a public outcry.

Article in *The Toad*, July 13, 1988

It was the morning following *Evade the Question Time*, and I had slept badly, waking up before Friday, which was unusual. I stared at the ceiling and thought about Kaine. I'd have to follow him to his next public engagement before he discovered that I had returned. I was just thinking about *why* Joffy and I had nearly been sucked into the whole Yorrick circus when Friday awoke and blinked at me in a breakfast sort of way. I dressed quickly and took him downstairs.

"Welcome to *Swindon Breakfast with Toad*," announced the TV presenter as we walked in, "with myself, Warwick Fridge, and the lovely Leigh Onzolent--"

"Hello."

"--bringing you two hours of news and views, fun and competitions to see you into the day. *Breakfast with Toad* is sponsored by Arkwright's Doorknobs, the finest door furniture in Wessex."



Warwick turned to Leigh, who was looking way too glamorous for eight in the morning.

She smiled and continued, "This morning we'll be speaking to croquet captain Roger Kapok about Swindon's chances in the SuperHoop-88 and also to a man who claims to have seen unicorns in a near-death experience. Network Toad's resident dodo whisperer will be on hand for your pet's psychiatric problems, and our Othello backwards-reading competition reaches the quarterfinals. Later on we talk to Mr. Joffy Next about tomorrow's potential resurrection with St. Zvlkx, but first the news. The CEO of Goliath has announced contrition targets to be attainable within--"

"Morning, daughter," said my mother, who had just walked into the kitchen. "I never thought of you as an early riser."

"I wasn't until junior turned up," I replied, pointing at Friday, who was eyeing the porridge pot expectantly, "but if there's one thing he knows how to do, it's eat."

"It's what you did best when you were his age. Oh," added my mother absently, "I have to give you something, by the way."

She hurried from the room and returned with a sheaf of official-looking papers.

"Mr. Hicks left them for you."

Braxton Hicks was my old boss back at Swindon SpecOps. I had left abruptly, and from the look of his opening letter, it didn't look like he was very happy about it. I had been demoted to "Literary Detective Researcher," and it demanded my gun and badge back. The second letter was an outstanding warrant of arrest due to a trumped-up charge over possession of a small amount of illegally owned bootleg cheese.

"Is cheese still overpriced?" I asked my mother.

"Criminal!" she muttered. "Over five hundred percent duty. And it's not just cheese, either. They've extended the duty to cover all dairy products--even yogurt."

I sighed. I would probably have to go into SpecOps and explain myself. I could beg forgiveness, go to the stressperts and plead posttraumatic stress disorder or Xplkqukkiccasia or something and ask for my old job back. Perhaps if I were to get handy with a nine iron, it might swing things with my golf-mad boss. Outside SpecOps was not a good place to be if I wanted to hunt Yorrick Kaine or lobby the

ChronoGuard for my husband back; it would help to have access to all the SpecOps and police databases.

I looked through the papers. I had apparently been found guilty of the cheese transgression and fined five thousand pounds plus costs.

"Did you pay this?" I asked my mother, showing her the court demand.

"Yes."

"Then I should pay you back."

"No need," she replied, adding before I could thank her, "I paid it out of *your* overdraft--which is quite big now."

"How . . . *thoughtful* of you."

"Don't mention it. Bacon and eggs?"

"Please."

"Coming up. Would you get the milk?"

I went to the front door to fetch the milk, and as I bent down to pick it up, there was a *whang-thop* noise as a bullet zipped past my ear and thudded into the doorframe next to me. I was about to slam the door and grab my automatic when an unaccountable stillness took hold, like a sudden becalming. Above me a pigeon hung frozen in the air, the wingtip feathers splayed as it reached the bottom of a downstroke. A motorcyclist on the road was balancing impossibly still, and passersby were now as stiff and unmoving as statues--even Pickwick had stopped in midwaddle. Time, for the moment at least, had frozen. I knew only one person who had a face that could stop a clock like this--my father. The question was, where was he?

I looked up and down the road. Nothing. Since I was about to be assassinated, I thought it might help to know who was doing the assassinating, so I walked down the garden path and across the road to the alley where de Floss had hidden himself so badly the previous day. It was here that I found my father looking at a small and very pretty blond woman no more than five foot high who was time frozen halfway through the process of disassembling a sniper's rifle. She was probably in her late twenties and her hair was pulled back into a pony tail held tight with a flower hair tie. I noted with a certain detached amusement that there was a lucky mascot attached to the trigger guard and the stock was covered with pink fur. Dad looked younger than I, but he was instantly recognizable. The odd nature of the time business tended to make their operatives live nonlinear lives--every

time I met him, he was of a different age.

"Hello, Dad."

"You were correct," he said, comparing the woman's rigid features with those on a series of photographs, "it's an assassin, all right."

"Never mind that for the moment!" I cried happily. "How are you? I haven't seen you for years!"

He turned and stared at me. "My dear girl, we spoke only a few hours ago!"

"No we didn't."

"We did, actually."

"We did *not*."

He stopped, stared at me for a moment and then looked at his watch, shook it and listened to it, then shook it again.

"Here," I said, handing him the chronograph I was wearing, "take mine."

"Very nice--thank you. Ah! I stand corrected. Three hours *from* now. It's an easy mistake to make. Did you have any thoughts about that matter we discussed?"

"No, Dad," I said in an exasperated tone. "It hasn't happened yet, remember?"

"You're always so *linear*," he muttered, returning to his job comparing the pictures to the assassin. "I think you ought to try and expand your horizons a bit--Bingo!"

He had found a picture that matched my assassin and read the label on the back.

"Expensive hit woman working in the Wiltshire-Oxford area. Looks petite and bijou but as deadly as the best of them. She trades under the name 'The Windowmaker.' " He paused. "Should be Widowmaker, shouldn't it?"

"But I heard that the Windowmaker was lethal," I pointed out. "A contract with her and you're deader than corduroy."

"I heard that, too," replied my father thoughtfully. "Sixty-seven victims--sixty-eight if she was the one that did Samuel Pring. She must have *meant* to miss. It's the only explanation. In any event, her real name is Cindy Stoker."

This was unexpected. Cindy was married to Spike Stoker, an operative over at SO-17 whom I had worked with a couple of times. I had even given him advice on how best to tell Cindy that he hunted down werewolves for a living--not the choicest profession for a potential husband.

"Cindy is my assassin? Cindy is the Windowmaker?"

"You know her?"

"Of her. Wife of a good friend."

"Well, don't get too chummy. She tries and fails to kill you three times. The second time with a bomb under your car on Monday, then next Friday at eleven in the morning--but she fails and you, ultimately, choose for her to die. I shouldn't really be telling you this, but like we discussed, we've got bigger fish to fry."

"What bigger fish to fry?"

"Sweetpea," he said, giving me his stern "Father knows best" voice, "I'm really not going to go through it all again. Now I have to get back to work--there's a timephoon brewing in the Dark Ages, and if we don't sort it out, we'll be picking anachronisms out of the time line for a century."

"Wait--you're working at the ChronoGuard?"

"I've told you all about this already! Do try and keep up--you're going to need all your wits about you over the next week. Now, get back to the house, and I'll start the world up again."

He wasn't in a very chatty mood, but since I would be seeing him later and would find out *then* what we had just discussed, there didn't seem a lot of point to talking anyway, so I bade him good-bye, and as I walked up the garden path, time returned to normal with a *snap*. The pigeon flew on, the traffic continued to move, and everything carried on as usual. Time had stopped so completely that everything my father and I had talked about occupied no time at all. Still, at least this meant I wouldn't have to be constantly looking over my shoulder if I knew when she would try to get rid of me. Mind you, I wasn't looking forward to her death. Spike would be severely pissed off.

I returned to the kitchen where Mum was still hard at work cooking my bacon and eggs. To her and Friday, I had been gone less than twenty seconds.

"What was that noise when you were at the door, Thursday?"

"Probably a car backfiring."

"Funny," she said, "I could have sworn it was a high-velocity bullet striking wood. Two eggs or one?"

"Two, please."

I picked up the newspaper, which was running a five-page expose revealing that "Danish pastries" were actually brought to Denmark by displaced Viennese bakers in the sixteenth century. "In what other ways," thundered the article, "have the dishonest Danes made fools of us?" I shook my head sadly and turned to another page.

Mum said she could look after Friday until tea, something I got her to promise *before* she had fully realized the implications of nappy changing and seen just how bad his manners were at breakfast. He yelled, "Ut enim ad veniam!" which might have meant "Look how far I can throw my porridge!" as a spoonful of oatmeal flew across the kitchen, much to the delight of DH-82, who had learned pretty quickly that hanging around messy toddlers at mealtimes was an extremely productive pastime.

Hamlet came down to breakfast, followed, after a prudent gap, by Emma. They bade each other good morning in such an obvious way that only their serious demeanor kept me from laughing out loud.

"Did you sleep well, Lady Hamilton?" asked Hamlet.

"I did, thank you. *My* room faces east for the morning light, you know."

"Ah!" replied Hamlet. "Mine *doesn't*. I believe it was once the box room. It has pretty pink wallpaper and a bedside light shaped like Tweety Pie. Not that I noticed much, of course, being fast asleep--on my own."

"Of course."

"Let me show you something," said Mum after breakfast.

I followed her down to Mycroft's workshop. Alan had kept Mum's dodos trapped in the potting shed all night and even now threatened to peck anyone who so much as looked at him "in a funny way."

"Pickwick!" I said sternly. "Are you going to let your son bully those dodos?"

Pickwick looked the other way and pretended to have an itchy foot. To be honest, she couldn't control Alan any more than I could. Only half an hour previously, he had chased the postman out of the garden accompanied by an angry *plink-plink-plink* noise, something even the postman had to admit "was a first."

Mum opened the side door to the large workshop, and we entered. This was where my uncle Mycroft did all his inventing. It was here that he had demonstrated, amongst many other things, translating carbon paper, a sarcasm early-warning device, Nextian Geometry and, most important to me, the Prose Portal--the method by which I first entered fiction. Mother was always nervous in Mycroft's lab. Many years ago he'd developed some four-dimensional paper, the idea being that you could print on the same sheet of paper again and again, isolating the different overprintings in marginally different time zones that could be read by the use of temporal spectacles. By going to the nanosecond level, a million sheets of text or pictures could be stored on one sheet of paper in a single second. Brilliant--but the paper *looked* identical to a standard sheet of 8 1/2-by-11--and it had been a long contentious family argument that my mother had used the irreplaceable prototype to line the compost bucket. It was no wonder she was careful near his inventions.

"What did you want to show me?"

She smiled and led me to the end of the workshop, and there, next to my stuff that she had rescued from my apartment, was the unmistakable shape of my Porsche 356 Speedster hidden beneath a dust sheet.

"I've run the engine every month and kept it MOTed for you. I even took it for a spin a couple of times."

She pulled the sheet off with a flourish. The car still looked slightly shabby after our various encounters, but just the way I liked it. I gently touched the bullet holes that had been made by Hades all those years ago, and the bent front wing where I had slid it into the river Severn. I opened the garage doors.

"Thanks, Mum. Sure you're all right with the boy Friday?"

"Until four this afternoon. But you have to promise me something."

"What's that?"

"That you'll come to my Eradications Anonymous group this evening."

"Mum--"

"It will do you good. You might enjoy it. Might *meet* someone. Might make you forget Linden."

"*Landen*. His name's *Landen*. And I don't need or want to forget him."

"Then the group will support you. Besides, you might learn something. Oh, and would you take Hamlet with you? Mr. Bismarck has a bee in his bonnet about Danes because of that whole silly Schleswig-Holstein thingummy."

I narrowed my eyes. Could Joffy be right?

"What about Emma? Do you want me to take her, too?"

"No. Why?"

". . . er, no reason."

I picked up Friday and gave him a kiss. "Be good, Friday. You're staying with Nana for the day."

Friday looked at me, looked at Mum, stuck his finger up his nose and said, "Sunt in culpa qui officia id est laborum?"

I ruffled his hair, and he showed me a booger he had found. I declined the present, wiped his hand with a hanky, then went to look for Hamlet. I found him in the front garden demonstrating a thrust-and-parry swordfight to Emma and Pickwick. Even Alan had left off bullying the other dodos and was watching in silence. I called out to Hamlet, and he came running.

"Sorry," said the Prince as I opened the garage doors, "just showing them how that damn fool Laertes gets his comeuppance."

I showed him how to get into the Porsche, dropped in myself, started the engine and drove off down the hill towards the Brunel Centre.

"You seem to be getting on very well with Emma."

"Who?" asked Hamlet, unconvincingly vague.

"Lady Hamilton."

"Oh, *her*. Nice girl. We have a lot in common."

"Such as . . . ?"

"Well," said Hamlet, thinking hard, "we both have a good friend

called Horatio."

We motored on down past the magic roundabout, and I pointed out the new stadium with its four floodlit towers standing tall amongst the low housing.

"That's our croquet stadium," I said. "Thirty thousand seats. Home of the Swindon Mallets croquet team."

"Croquet is a national sport out here?"

"Oh, yes," I replied, knowing a thing or two about it, since I used to play myself. "It has evolved a lot since the early days. For a start the teams are bigger--ten a side in World Croquet League. The players have to get their balls through the hoops in the quickest possible time, so it can be quite rough. A stray ball can pack a wallop, and a flailing mallet is potentially lethal. The WCL insists on body armor and Plexiglas barriers for the spectators."

I turned left into Manchester Road and parked up behind a Griffin-6 Lowrider.

"What now?"

"Haircut. You don't think I'm going to spend the next few weeks looking like Joan of Arc, do you?"

"Ah!" said Hamlet. "You hadn't mentioned it for a while, so I'd stopped noticing. If it's all right with you, I'll just stay here and write a letter to Horatio. Does 'pirate' have one *t* or two?"

"One."

I walked into Mum's hairdresser. The stylists looked at my hair with a sort of shocked numbness until Lady Volescamper, who along with her increasingly eccentric mayoral husband constituted Swindon's most visible aristocracy, suddenly pointed at me and said in a strident tone that could shatter glass:

"That's the style I want. Something new. Something retro--something to cause a sensation at the Swindon Mansion House Ball!"

Mrs. Barnet, who was both the chief stylist and official gossip laureate of Swindon, kept her look of horror to herself and then said diplomatically, "Of course. And may I say that Her Grace's boldness matches her sense of style."

Lady Volescamper returned to her *FeMole* magazine, appearing not to recognize me, which was just as well--the last time I went to Vole



Towers, a hell beast from the darkest depths of the human imagination trashed the entrance lobby.

"Hello, Thursday," said Mrs. Barnet, wrapping a sheet around me with an expert flourish, "haven't seen you for a while."

"I've been away."

"In prison?"

"No--just away."

"Ah. How would you like it? I have it on good authority that the Joan of Arc look is set to be quite popular this summer."

"You know I'm not a fashion person, Gladys. Just get rid of the dopey haircut, would you?"

"As madame wishes." She hummed to herself for a moment, then asked, "Been on holiday this year?"

I got back to the car a half hour later to find Hamlet talking to a traffic warden, who seemed so engrossed in whatever he was telling her that she wasn't writing me a ticket.

"And that," said Hamlet as soon as I came within earshot and making a thrusting motion with his hand, "was when I cried, 'A rat, a rat!' and killed the unseen old man. Hello, Thursday--goodness--that's short, isn't it?"

"It's better than it was. C'mon, I've got to go and get my job back."

"Job?" asked Hamlet as we drove off, leaving a very indignant traffic warden who wanted to know what had happened next.

"Yes. Out here you need money to live."

"I've got lots," said Hamlet generously. "You should have some of mine."

"Somehow I don't think fictional kroner from an unspecified century will cut the mustard down at the First Goliath--and put the skull away. They aren't generally considered a fashion accessory here in the Outland."

"They're all the rage where I come from."

"Well, not here. Put it in this grocery bag."

"Stop!"

I screeched to a halt. "What?"

"That, over there. *It's me!*"

Before I could say anything, Hamlet had jumped out of the car and run across the road to a coin-operated machine on the corner of the street. I parked the Speedster and walked over to join him. He was staring with delight at the simple box, the top half of which was glazed; inside was a suitably attired mannequin visible from the waist up.

"It's called a WillSpeak machine," I said, passing him a shopping bag. "Here--put the skull in the bag like I asked."

"What does it do?"

"Officially it's called a 'Shakespeare Soliloquy Vending Automaton, ' I explained. "You put in two shillings and get a short snippet from Shakespeare."

"Of me?"

"Yes," I said, "of you."

For it was, of course, a *Hamlet* WillSpeak machine, and the mannequin Hamlet sat looking blankly out at the flesh-and-blood Hamlet standing next to me.

"Can we hear a bit?" asked Hamlet excitedly.

"If you want. Here."

I dug out a coin and placed it in the machine. There was a whirring and clicking as the dummy came to life.

"*To be, or not to be,*" began the mannequin in a hollow, metallic voice. The machine had been built in the thirties and was now pretty much worn out. "*That is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind--*"

Hamlet was fascinated, like a child listening to a tape recording of his own voice for the first time. "Is that really me?" he asked.

"The words are yours--but actors do it a lot better."

"--*Or to take arms against a sea of troubles--*"

"Actors?"

"Yes. Actors, playing Hamlet."

He looked confused.

"--*That flesh is heir to*--"

"I don't understand."

"Well," I began, looking around to check that no one was listening, "you know that you are Hamlet, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*?"

"Yes?"



*For it was, of course, a Hamlet WillSpeak machine, and the mannequin Hamlet sat looking blankly out at the flesh-and-blood Hamlet standing next to me.*

*"--To die, to sleep, to sleep--perchance to dream--"*

*"Well, that's a play, and out here in the Outland, people act out that*

play."

"With me?"

"Of you. *Pretending* to be you."

"But I'm the real me?"

"--*Who would fardels bear--*"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Ahhh, " he said after a few moments of deep thought, "I see. Like the whole *Murder of Gonzago* thing. I wondered how it all worked. Can we go and see me sometime?"

"I . . . *suppose*," I answered uneasily. "Do you really want to?"

"--*from whose bourn no traveler returns--*"

"Of course. I've heard that some people in the Outland think I am a dithering twit unable to make up his mind rather than a dynamic leader of men, and these 'play' things you describe will prove it to me one way or the other."

I tried to think of the movie in which he prevaricates the least. "We could get the Zeffirelli version out on video for you to look at."

"Who plays me?"

"Mel Gibson."

"--*Thus conscience does make cowards of us all--*"

Hamlet stared at me, mouth open. "But that's *incredible!*" he said ecstatically. "I'm Mel's biggest fan!" He thought for a moment. "So . . . Horatio must be played by Danny Glover, yes?"

"--*sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought--*"

"No, no. Listen: the *Lethal Weapon* series is nothing like *Hamlet*."

"Well," replied the Prince reflectively, "in that I think you might be mistaken. The Martin Riggs character begins with self-doubt and contemplates suicide over the loss of a loved one but eventually turns into a decisive man of action and kills all the bad guys. Same as the *Road Warrior* series, really. Is Ophelia played by Patsy Kensit?"

"No," I replied, trying to be patient, "Helena Bonham Carter."

He perked up when he heard this. "This gets better and better! When I tell Ophelia, she'll flip--if she hasn't already."

"Perhaps," I said thoughtfully, "you'd better see the Olivier version instead. Come on, we've work to do."

*"--their currents turn awry / And lose the name of action."*

The WillSpeak Hamlet stopped clicking and whirring and sat silent once more, waiting for the next florin.

## 5.

### Ham (let) and Cheese

#### "Seven Wonders of Swindon" Naming Bureaucracy Unveiled

After five years of careful consideration, Swindon City Council has unveiled the naming procedure for the city's much vaunted "Seven Wonders" tourism plan. The twenty-seven-point procedure is the most costly and complicated piece of bureaucracy the city has ever devised and might even be included as one of the wonders itself. The plan will be undertaken by the Swindon Special Committee for Wonders, which will consider applications prepared by the Seven Wonders Working Party from six separate name-selection subcommittees. Once chosen, the wonders will be further scrutinized by eight different oversight committees before being adopted. The byzantine and needlessly expensive system is already tipped to win the coveted Red Tape Award from *Bureaucracy Today*.

Article in *Swindon Globe News*, June 12, 1988

I drove to the car park above the Brunel Centre and bought a pay-and-display ticket, noting how they had almost tripled in price since I was here last. I looked in my purse. I had fifteen pounds, three shillings and an old Skyrail ticket.

"Short of cash?" asked Hamlet as we walked down the stairs to the street-level concourse.

"Let's just say I'm very 'receipt rich' at present."

Money had never been a problem in the BookWorld. All the details of life were taken care of by something called Narrative Assumption. A reader would *assume* you had gone shopping, or gone to the toilet, or brushed your hair, so a writer never needed to outline it-which was just as well, really. I'd forgotten all about the real-world

trivialities, but I was actually quite enjoying them, in a mind-dulling sort of way.

"It says here," said Hamlet, who had been reading the newspaper, "that Denmark invaded England and put hundreds of innocent English citizens to death without trial!"

"It was the Vikings in 786, Hamlet. I hardly think that warrants the headline BLOODTHIRSTY DANES GO ON RAMPAGE. Besides, at the time they were no more Danish than we were English."

"So we're not the historical enemies of England?"

"Not at all."

"And eating rollmop herrings won't lead to erectile dysfunction?"

"No. And keep your voice down. All these people are real, not D-7 generic crowd types. Out here, you only exist in a play."

"Okay," he said, stopping at an electronics shop and staring at the TVs. "Who's she?"

"Lola Vavoom. An actress."

"Really? Has she ever played Ophelia?"

"Many times."

"Was she better than Helena Bonham Carter?"

"Both good--just *different*."

"Different? What do you mean?"

"They both brought different things to the role."

Hamlet laughed. "I think you're confusing the matter, Thursday. Ophelia is just Ophelia."

"Not out here. Listen, I'm just going to see how bad my overdraft is."

"How you Outlanders complicate matters!" he murmured. "If we were in a book right now, you'd be accosted by a solicitor who tells you a wealthy aunt has died and left you lots of money--and then we'd just start the next chapter with you in London making your way to Kaine's office disguised as a cleaning woman."

"Excuse me!" said a suited gentleman who looked suspiciously like a solicitor. "But are you Thursday Next?"

I glanced nervously at Hamlet.



"Perhaps."

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Mr. Wentworth of Wentworth, Wentworth and Wentworth, Solicitors. I'm the second Wentworth, if you're interested."

"And?"

"And . . . I wonder if I could have your autograph? I followed your *Jane Eyre* escapade with a great deal of interest."

I breathed a sigh of relief and signed his autograph book. Mr. Wentworth thanked me and hurried off.

"You had me worried for a moment there," said Hamlet. "I thought I was meant to be the fictitious one."

"You are." I smiled. "And don't you forget it."

"Twenty-two thousand pounds?" I said to the cashier. "Are you sure?"

The cashier looked at me with unblinking eyes, then at Hamlet, who was standing over me a bit indelicately.

"Quite sure. Twenty-two thousand, three hundred eight pounds and four shillings three pence ha'penny--*overdrawn*," she added, in case I had missed it. "Your landlord sued you for dodo-related tenancy violations and won five thousand pounds. Since you weren't here, we upped your credit limit when he demanded payment. Then we raised the limit again to pay for the additional interest."

"How very thoughtful of you."

"Thank you. Goliath First National Friendly always aims to please."

"Are you *sure* you wouldn't rather go with the 'wealthy aunt' scenario?" asked Hamlet, being no help at all.

"No. Shhh."

"We haven't had a single deposit from you for nearly two and a half years," continued the bank clerk.

"I've been away."

"Prison?"

"No. So the rest of my overdraft is . . . ?"

"Interest on the money we lent you, interest on the interest we lent

you, letters asking for money that we know you haven't got, letters asking for an address that we knew wouldn't reach you, letters asking whether you got the letters we knew you hadn't received, further letters asking for a response because we have an odd sense of humor--you know how it all adds up! Can we expect a check in the near future?"

"Not really. Um . . . any chance of raising my credit limit?"

The cashier arched an eyebrow. "I can get you an appointment to see the manager. Do you have an address to which we can send expensive letters demanding money?"

I gave them Mum's address and made an appointment to see the manager. We walked past the statue of Brunel and the Booktastic shop, which I noted was still open, despite several closing-down sales--one of which I had witnessed with Miss Havisham.

Miss Havisham. How I had missed her guidance in my first few months heading Jurisfiction. With her I might have avoided that whole stupid sock episode in *Lake Wobegon Days*.

"Okay, I give up," said Hamlet quite suddenly. "How does it all turn out?"

"How does *what* all turn out?"

He spread his arms out wide.

"All this. You, your husband, Miss Hamilton, the small dodo, that SuperHoop thing and the big company--what's it called again?"

"Goliath?"

"Right. How does it all turn out?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. Out here our lives are pretty much an unknown quantity."

Hamlet seemed shocked by the concept. "How do you live here not knowing what the future might bring?"

"That's part of the fun. The pleasure of anticipation."

"There is no pleasure in anticipation," said Hamlet glumly. "Except perhaps," he added, "in killing that old fool Polonius."

"My point exactly," I replied. "Where you come from, events are preordained and everything that happens to you has some sort of

relevance further on in the story."

"It's clear you haven't read *Hamlet* for a--LOOK OUT!"

Hamlet pushed me out of the way as a small steamroller--the size that works on sidewalks and paths--bore rapidly down upon us and crashed past into the window of the shop we had been standing outside. The roller stopped amongst a large display of electrical goods, the rear wheels still rotating.

"Are you okay?" asked Hamlet, helping me to my feet.

"I'm fine--thanks to you."

"Goodness!" said a workman, running up to us and turning a valve to shut off the roller. "Are you all right?"

"Not hurt in the least. What happened?"

"I don't know," replied the workman, scratching his head. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Really, I'm fine."

We walked off as a crowd began to gather. The owner of the shop didn't look that upset; doubtless he was thinking about what he could charge to insurance.

"You see?" I said to Hamlet as we walked away.

"What?"

"This is *exactly* what I mean. A lot happens in the real world for no good reason. If this were fiction, this little incident would have relevance thirty or so chapters from now; as it is it means nothing--after all, not every incident in life *has* a meaning."

"Tell that to the scholars who study *me*," Hamlet snorted disdainfully, then thought for a moment before adding, "If the real world were a book, it would *never* find a publisher. Overlong, detailed to the point of distraction--and ultimately, without a major resolution."

"Perhaps," I said thoughtfully, "that's exactly what we like about it."

We reached the SpecOps Building. It was of a sensible Germanic design built during the occupation, and it was here that I, along with Bowden Cable and Victor Analogy, dealt with Acheron Hades' plot to kidnap Jane Eyre out of *Jane Eyre*. Hades had failed and died in the

attempt. I wondered how many of the old gang would still be around. I had sudden doubts and decided to think for a moment before going in. Perhaps I should have a plan of action instead of charging in Zhark-like.

"Fancy a coffee, Hamlet?"

"Please."

We walked into the Cafe Goliathe opposite. The same one, in fact, that I had last seen Landen walking towards an hour before he was eradicated.

"Hey!" said the man behind the counter who seemed somehow familiar. "We don't serve those kind in here!"

"What kind?"

"The *Danish* kind."

Goliath was obviously working with Kaine on this particular nonsense.

"He's not Danish. He's my cousin Eddie from Wolverhampton."

"Really? Then why is he dressed like Hamlet?"

I thought quickly. "Because . . . he's insane. Isn't that right, Cousin Eddie?"

"Yes," said Hamlet, to whom feigning madness was not much of a problem. "When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw."

"See?"

"Well, that's all right, then."

I started as I realized why he seemed familiar. It was Mr. Cheese, one of the Goliath corporate bullies that Brik Schitt-Hawse had employed. He and his partner, Mr. Chalk, had made my life difficult before I left. He didn't have his goatee anymore, but it was definitely him. Undercover? I doubted it--his name was on his Cafe Goliathe badge with, I noted, two gold stars, one for washing up and the other for latte frothing. But he didn't show any sign of recognizing me.

"What will you have, Ham--I mean, Cousin Eddie?"

"What is there?"

"Espresso, mocha, latte, white mocha, hot chocolate, decaf, recaf,

nocaf, somecaf, extracaf, Goliachino™ . . . what's the matter?"

Hamlet had started to tremble, a look of pain and hopelessness on his face as he stared wild-eyed at the huge choice laid out in front of him.

"To espresso or to latte, that is the question," he muttered, his free will evaporating rapidly. I had asked Hamlet for something he couldn't easily supply: a decision. "Whether 'tis tastier on the palate to choose white mocha over plain," he continued in a rapid garble, "or to take a cup to go. Or a mug to stay, or extra cream, or have nothing, and by opposing the endless choice, end one's heartache--"

"Cousin Eddie!" I said sharply. "Cut it out!"

"To froth, to sprinkle, perchance to drink, and in that--"

"He'll have a mocha with extra cream, please."

Hamlet stopped abruptly once the burden of decision was taken from him.

"Sorry," he said, rubbing his temples, "I don't know what came over me. All of a sudden I had this overwhelming desire to talk for a very long time without actually *doing* anything. Is that normal?"

"Not for me. I'll have a latte, Mr. *Cheese*," I said, watching his reaction carefully.

He still didn't seem to recognize me. He rang up the cost and then started making the coffees.

"Do you remember me?"

He narrowed his eyes and stared at me carefully for a moment or two. "No."

"Thursday Next?"

His face broke into a broad grin, and he put out a large hand for me to shake, welcoming me as an old workmate rather than a past nemesis. I faltered, then shook his hand slowly.

"Miss Next! Where have you been? Prison?"

"Away."

"Ah! But you're well?"

"I'm okay," I said suspiciously, retrieving my hand. "How are you?"

"Not bad!" he laughed, looking at me sideways for a moment and narrowing his eyes. "You've changed. What is it?"

"Almost no hair?"

"That's it. We were looking for you everywhere. You spent almost eighteen months in the Goliath top ten most wanted--although you never made it to the number-one slot."

"I'm devastated."

"No one has ever spent ten months on the list," carried on Cheese with a sort of dreamy, nostalgic look. "The next longest was three weeks. We looked *everywhere* for you!"

"But you gave up?"

"Goodness me, no," replied Cheese. "Perseverance is what Goliath does best. There was a restructuring of corporate policy, and we were *reallocated*."

"You mean fired."

"No one is ever fired from Goliath," said Cheese in a shocked tone. "Cots to coffins. You've heard the adverts."

"So just moved on from bullying and terrifying and into lattes and mochas?"

"Haven't you heard?" said Cheese, frothing up some milk. "Goliath has moved its corporate image away from the 'overbearing bully' and more towards 'peace, love and understanding.'"

"I heard something about it last night," I replied, "but you'll forgive me if I'm not convinced."

"Forgive is what Goliath does best, Miss Next. Faith is a difficult commodity to imbue--and that's why violent and ruthless bullies like me have to be reallocated. Our corporate seer, Sister Bettina, foresaw a necessity for us to change to a faith-based corporate-management system, but the rules concerning new religions are quite strict--we have to make changes to the corporation that are meaningful and genuine. That's why the old Goliath Internal Security Service is now known as Goliath Is Seriously Sorry--you see, we even kept the old initials so we didn't have to divert money away from good causes to buy new headed notepaper."

"Or have to change them back when this charade has been played out."

"You know," said Cheese, waving a finger at me, "you always were just that teensy-weensy bit cynical. You should learn to be more trusting."

"Trusting. Right. And you think the public will believe this touchy-feely, good-Lord-we're-sorry-forgive-us-please crap after four decades of rampant exploitation?"

"Rampant exploitation?" echoed Cheese in a dismayed tone. "I don't think so. 'Proactive greater goodification' was more what we had in mind--and it's five decades, not four. Are you sure your cousin Eddie isn't Danish?"

"*Definitely* not."

I thought about Brik Schitt-Hawse, the odious Goliath agent who'd had my husband eradicated in the first place. "What about Schitt-Hawse? Where does he work these days?"

"I think he moved into some post in Goliathopolis. I really don't move in those circles anymore. Mind you, we should all get together for a reunion and have a drink! What do you think?"

"I think I'd rather have my husband back," I replied darkly.

"Oh!" said Cheese, suddenly remembering just what particular unpleasantness he and Goliath had done to me. Then he added slowly, "You must *hate* us!"

"Just a lot."

"We can't have that. Repent is what Goliath does best. Have you applied for a Goliath Unfair Treatment Reversal?"

I stared at him and raised an eyebrow.

"Well," he began, "Goliath has been allowing disgruntled citizens to apply to have reversed any unfair or unduly harsh measures taken against them--sort of a big apology, really. If Goliath is to become the opiate of the masses, we must first atone for our sins. We like to right any wrongs and then have a good strong hug to show we really mean it."

"Hence your demotion to coffee-shop attendant."

"Exactly so!"

"How do I apply?"

"We've opened an Apologarium in Goliathopolis; you can take the

free shuttle from Tarbuck Graviport. They'll tell you what to do."

"Harmonious peace, eh?"

"Peace is what Goliath does best, Miss Next. Just fill out a form and see one of our trained apologists. I'm sure they can get your husband back in a jiffy!"

I took the mocha with extra cream and the latte and sat by the window, staring at the SpecOps Building in silence. Hamlet sensed my disquiet and busied himself on a list of things he wanted to tell Ophelia but didn't think he would be able to, then another list of things he should tell her but won't. Then a list of all the different lists he had written about Ophelia and, finally, a letter of appreciation to Sir John Gielgud.

"I'm going to sort out a few things," I said after a while. "Don't move from here, and don't tell anyone who you really are. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Who are you?"

"Hamlet, Prince of . . . just kidding. I'm your cousin Eddie."

"Good. And you have cream on your nose."



## 6.

### Spec Ops

The Special Operations Network was the agency that looked after areas too specialized to be undertaken by the regular police. There were over thirty SpecOps divisions. SO-1 policed us all, SO-12 was the ChronoGuard, and SO-13 dealt with reengineered species. SO-17 was the Vampire and Werewolf Disposal Operations and SO-32 the Horticultural Enforcement Agency. I had been SO-27, the Literary Detectives. Ten years authenticating Milton and tracking down forged Shakespeareana. After my work actually *within* fiction, it all seemed a bit tame. At Jurisfiction I could catch a horse as it bolted--in the Literary Detectives, it was like wandering around a very large field armed with only a halter and a photograph of a carrot.

Thursday Next, *Private Journals*

I pushed open the door to the station and walked in. The building was shared with Swindon's regular force and seemed slightly shabbier than I remembered. The walls were the same dismal shade of green, and I could smell the faint aroma of boiled cabbage from the canteen on the second floor. In truth, my stay here in late '85 had not actually been that long--most of my SpecOps career had been undertaken in London.

I walked over to the main desk, expecting to see Sergeant Ross. He had been replaced by someone who seemed too young to be a police officer, much less a desk sergeant.

"I'm here to get my old job back," I announced.

"Which was?"

"Literary Detective."

He chuckled. Unkindly, I thought.

"You'll need to see the commander," he replied without taking his

gaze from the book he was scribbling in. "Name?"

"Thursday Next."

A hush descended slowly on the room, beginning with those closest to me and moving outwards with my whispered name like ripples in a pool. Within a few moments I was being stared at in silence by at least two dozen assorted police and SpecOps officers, a couple of Gaskell impersonators and an ersatz Coleridge. I gave an embarrassed smile and looked from blank face to blank face, trying to figure out whether to run, or to fight, or what. My heart beat faster as a young officer quite close to me reached into his breast pocket and pulled out--a notebook.

"Please," he said. "I wonder if I might have your autograph?"

"Well, no--of course not."

I breathed a sign of relief, and pretty soon I was having my back slapped and being congratulated on the whole *Jane Eyre* adventure. I'd forgotten the celebrity thing but also noticed that there were officers in the room who were interested in me for another reason--SO-1, probably.

"I need to see Bowden Cable," I said to the desk sergeant, realizing that if anyone could help, it was my old partner. He smiled, picked up a phone, announced me and wrote out a visitor's pass, then told me to go to Interview Suite 16 on the third floor. I thanked my newfound acquaintances, made my way to the elevators and ascended to the third floor. When the lift doors rattled open I walked with a hurried step towards Room 16. Halfway there I was accosted by Bowden, who slid his arm in mine and steered me into an empty office.

"Bowden!" I said happily. "How are you?"

He hadn't changed much in the past two years. Fastidiously neat, he was wearing the usual pinstripe suit but without jacket, so he must have been in a hurry to meet me.

"I'm good, Thursday, real good. But where the hell have you been?"

"I've been--"

"You can tell me later. Thank the GSD I got to you first! We don't have a lot of time. Goodness! What have you done to your hair?"

"Well, Joan of--"

"You can tell me later. Ever heard of Yorrick Kaine?"

"Of course! I'm here to--"

"No time for explanations. He's not fond of you at all. He has a personal adviser named Ernst Stricknene who calls us *every day* to ask if you've returned. But this morning--*he didn't call!*"

"So?"

"So he knows you're back. Why is the Chancellor interested in you, anyway?"

"Because he's fictional, and I want to take him back to the BookWorld where he belongs."

"That coming from anyone but you, I'd laugh. Is that really true?"

"As true as I'm standing here."

"Well, your life is in danger, that's all I know. Ever heard of the assassin known as the--"

"Windowmaker?"

"How did you know?"

"I have my sources. Any idea who took out the contract?"

"Well, they've killed sixty-seven people--sixty-eight if they did Samuel Pring--and they *definitely* did the number on Gordon Duff-Rolecks, whose death really only benefited--"

"Kaine."

"Exactly. You need to take particular care. More than that, we need you back as a full serving member of the Literary Detectives. We've got one or two problems that need ironing out in our department."

"So what do we do?"

"Well, you're AWOL at best and a cheese smuggler at worst. So we've concocted a cover story of such bizarre complexity and outrageous daring that it can only be true. Here it is: in a parallel universe ruled entirely by lobsters, you--"

But at that moment, the door opened and a familiar figure walked in. I say familiar, but not exactly welcome. It was Commander Braxton Hicks, head of SpecOps here in Swindon.

I could almost hear Bowden's heart fall--mine, too.

Hicks still had a job because of me, but I didn't expect that to count

for much. He was a company man, a bean counter--more fond of his precious budget than anything else. He had never given me any quarter, and I didn't expect any now.

"Ah, found you!" said the Commander in a serious tone. "Miss Next. They told me you'd arrived. Been giving us the little run-around, haven't you?"

"She's been--" began Bowden.

"I'm sure Miss Next can explain for herself, hmmm?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Close the door behind you, eh?"

Bowden gave a sickly smile and slinked out of the interview room.

Braxton sat, opened my file and stroked his large mustache thoughtfully.

"Absent without leave for over two years, demoted eighteen months ago, nonreturn of SpecOps weapon, badge and ruler, pencil, eight pens and a dictionary."

"I can explain--"

"Then there is the question of the illegal cheese we found under a Hispano-Suiza at your picnic two and half years ago. I have sworn affidavits from everyone present that you were alone, met them up there, and that the cheese was yours."

"Yes, but--"

"And the traffic police said they saw you aiding and abetting a known serial dangerous driver on the A419 north of Swindon."

"That's--"

"But what's worse was that you lied to me systematically from the moment you came under my command. You said you would learn to play golf, and you never so much as picked up a putter."

"But--"

"I have proof of your lies, too. I personally visited every single golf club, and not one of them had ever let someone of your description play golf there--not even on the practice ranges. How do you explain *that*, eh?"

"Well--"

"You vanish from sight two and a half years ago. Not a word. Had to demote you. Star employee. Newspapers had a field day. Upset my swing for weeks."

"I'm sorry if it upset your golf, sir."

"You're rather in the soup, young lady."

He stared at me in exactly the sort of way my English teacher used to at school, and I had that sudden and dangerously overpowering urge to laugh out loud. Luckily, I didn't.

"What have you got to say for yourself?"

"I can explain, if you'll let me."

"My girl, I've been trying to get you to tell me for five--"

The door opened again, and in walked Colonel Flanker of SO-1. He ran Internal Affairs, the SpecOps Police. About as welcome as worms and another old bete noire of mine. If Hicks was bad, Flanker was worse. Braxton only wanted me to do some sort of disciplinary nonsense--Flanker would want to lock me up for good, *after* I had led them to my father.

"So!" he said as soon as he saw me. "It's true. Thank you, Braxton, my prisoner. Officer Jodrell, cuff her."

Jodrell walked over to me, took one of my wrists and placed it behind my back. There didn't seem to be much point of running; I could see at least three other SO-1 agents hovering near the door. I thought of Friday. If only Bowden had got to me a few minutes earlier!

"Just a minute, Mr. Flanker," said Braxton, closing my file. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Arresting Miss Next on charges of being AWOL, dereliction of duty and illegal possession of bootleg cheese--for starters."

"She was on assignment for SO-23," said Braxton, staring at him evenly, "undercover for the Cheese Squad."

I couldn't believe my ears. Braxton lying? For *me*?

"The Cheese Squad?" echoed Flanker with some surprise.

"Yes," replied Braxton, who, once started, clearly found the subterfuge and reckless use of his authority somewhat exciting. "She's

been in deep cover in Wales for two years on a clandestine espionage operation monitoring illegal cheese factories. The cheeses with her fingerprints on them were part of an illegal cross-border shipment that she helped seize."

"Really?" said Flanker, his confidence rattled.

"On my word. She's not under arrest, she's being debriefed. It seems that the operation was under the control of Joe Martlet. Full details will be available from him."

"You know as well as I do that Joe was shot dead by the Cheese Mafia two weeks ago."

"It was a tragedy," admitted Braxton. "Fine man, Martlet--one of the best. Could play a three under par with ease and never swore when he drove it into the rough--and hence Miss Next's reappearance," he added without a pause. "I'd never seen anyone lie so well before. Not even me. Not even Friday when I found he'd raided the cookie jar with Pickwick's help."

"Is this true?" asked Flanker. "Two years undercover in Wales?"

"*Ydy, ond dydy hi ddim wedi bwrw glaw pob dydd!*" I replied in my best Welsh.

He narrowed his eyes and stared at me for a moment without speaking.

"I was just reassigning her to the Literary Detectives when you walked in the door," added Braxton.

Flanker looked at Braxton, then at me, then at Braxton again. He nodded to Jodrell, who released me.

"Very well. But I want a full report on my desk Tuesday."

"You can have it Friday, Mr. Flanker. I'm a very busy man."

Flanker glared at me for a moment, then addressed Braxton: "Since Miss Next is back with the Literary Detectives perhaps you would be good enough to appoint her the SO-14 Danish Book Seizure Liaison Officer. My boys are pretty good at the seizure stuff, but to be honest, none of them can tell a Mark Twain from a Samuel Clemens."

"I'm not sure I want--" I began.

"I think you should be happy to assist me, Miss Next, don't you? A chance to make amends for past transgressions, yes?"

Braxton answered for me.

"I'm sure Miss Next would be happy to assist in any way she can, Mr. Flanker."

Flanker gave a rare smile.

"Good. I'll have my divisional head of SO-14 get in touch with you." He turned to Braxton. "But I'll still need that report on Tuesday."

"You'll get it," replied Braxton, ". . . on Friday."

Flanker glared at us both and without another word strode from the room, his minions at his heels. When the door closed I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Sir, I--"

"I don't want to hear anything more about it," replied Braxton sharply, gathering up his papers. "I retire in two months' time and wanted to do something that made my whole pen-pushing, play-it-safe, shiny-arse career actually be worth it. I don't know what's going to happen to the LiteraTec division with all this insane Danish book-burning stuff, but what I do know is that people like you need to stay in it. Lead them on a merry goose chase, young lady--I can keep Flanker wrapped up in red tape pretty much forever."

"Braxton," I said, giving him a spontaneous hug, "you're a darling!"

"Nonsense!" he said gruffly, and a tad embarrassed. "But I do expect a little something in return."

"And that is?"

"Well," he said slowly, his eyes dropping to the ground, "I wonder if you and I might--"

"Might what?"

"Might . . . play golf on Sunday. A few holes." His eyes gleamed. "Just for you to get the taste. Believe me, as soon as you grasp the handle of a golf club, you'll be hooked forever! Mrs. Hicks need never know. How about it?"

"I'll be there at nine," I told him, laughing.

"You'll be a long time waiting--I get there at eleven."

"Eleven it is."

I shook his hand and walked out of the door a free woman.

Sometimes help arrives from the last place you expect it.



## The Literary Detectives

### Goliath Corporation Publishes Broad Denial

The Goliath Corporation yesterday attempted to head off annoying and time-wasting speculation by issuing the broadest denial to date. "Quite simply, we deny everything," said Mr. Toedee, the Goliath head PR operative, "including any story that you might have heard now or in the future." Goliath's shock tactics reflected the growing unease with Goliath's unaccountability, especially over its advanced weapons division. "It's very simple," continued Mr. Toedee. "Until we have been elevated to a Faith when everything can be denied using the 'Goliath works in mysterious ways' excuse, we expressly deny possessing, or any involvement with, the Ovinator, Anti-Smite technology, Speedgrow tomatoes or Diatrymas running wild in the New Forest. In fact, we don't know what any of these things are." To cries of "What is an Ovinator?" and "Tomatoes?" Mr. Toedee declared the press conference over, blessed everyone and departed.

Article in *The Toad on Sunday*, July 3, 1988

I found Bowden fretting in the LiteraTec office and related what had happened.

"Well, well," he said at last, "I think old Braxton's got a crush."

"Oh, stop it!"

The office we were sitting in resembled a large library in a country house somewhere. It was two stories high, with shelves crammed full of books covering every square inch of wall space. A spiral staircase led to a catwalk that ran around the wall, enabling access to the upper galleries. It was neat and methodical--but somehow less busy than I remembered.

"Where is everyone?"

"When you were here last, we had a staff of eight. Now it's only

Victor, me, and Malin. All the rest were reassigned or laid off."

"All SpecOps departments?"

Bowden laughed. "Of course not! The bullyboys at SO-14 are alive and well and answer to Yorrick Kaine's every order. SO-1 hasn't seen many cuts, either--"

"Thursday, what a delightful surprise!"

It was Victor Analogy, my old boss here at the Swindon LiteraTecs. He was an elderly gentlemen with large muttonchop side-burns and was dressed in a neat tweed suit and bow tie. He had taken off his jacket due to the summer heat but still managed to cut a very dashing figure, despite his advanced age.

"Victor, you're looking very well!"

"And you, dear girl. What devilry have you been up to since last we met?"

"It's a long story."

"The best sort. Let me guess: *inside* fiction?"

"In one."

"What's it like?"

"It's quite good, really. Confusing at times and subject to moments of extreme imaginative overload, but varied, and the weather's generally pretty good. Can we talk safely in here?"

Victor nodded, and we sat down. I told them about Jurisfiction, the Council of Genres and everything else that had happened to me during my tenure as Bellman. I even told them loosely about my involvement in *The Solution of Edwin Drood*, which amused them both no end.

"I've always wondered about that," mused Victor thoughtfully. "But you're sure about Yorrick Kaine's being fictional?"

I told him that I was.

He stood up and walked to the window. "You'll have a hard time getting close," said Victor thoughtfully. "Does he know you're back?"

"Definitely," said Bowden.

"Then you could be threatening his position as absolute ruler of England almost as much as President Formby is. I should keep on your toes, my girl. Is there anything we can do to help?"

I thought for a moment. "There is, actually. We can't find which book Yorrick Kaine has escaped from. He could be using a false name, and we should contact any readers who might recognize the Chancellor's somewhat crazed antics from an obscure character they might have read somewhere. We at Jurisfiction have been going through the Great Library at our end, but we've still drawn a blank--every character in fiction has been accounted for."

"We'll do what we can, Thursday. When can you rejoin us?"

"I don't know," I answered slowly. "I have to get my husband back. Remember I told you he was eradicated by the ChronoGuard?"

"Yes. *Lindane*, wasn't it?"

"Landen. If it weren't for him, I'd probably stay inside fiction."

We all fell silent for a moment.

"So," I said cheerfully, "what's been happening in the world of the LiteraTecs?"

Victor frowned.

"We can't hold with the book-burning lark of Kaine's. You heard about the order to start incinerating Danish literature?"

I nodded.

"Kierkegaard's works are being rounded up as we speak. I told Braxton that if we were asked to do any of it we'd resign."

"Oh-ah."

"I'm not sure I like the way you said that," said Bowden.

I winced. "I agreed to be the SO-14 Danish Book Seizure Liaison Officer for Flanker--sorry. I didn't have much of a choice."

"I see that as *good* news," put in Bowden. "You can have them searching in places they won't find any Danish books. Just be careful. Flanker has been suspicious ever since we said we were too busy to find out who was planning to smuggle copies of *The Concept of Dread* to Wales for safekeeping."

Bowden laughed and lowered his voice. "It wasn't an excuse," he chuckled. "We actually *were* too busy--gathering copies of banned books ready for transportation to Wales!"

Victor grimaced. "I really don't want to hear this, Bowden. If you get caught, we'll all be for the high jump!"

"Some things are worth going to jail for, Victor," replied Bowden in an even tone. "As LiteraTecs we swore to uphold and defend the written word--not indulge a crazed politician's worst paranoid fantasies."

"Just be careful."

"Of course," replied Bowden. "It might come to nothing if we can't find a way to get the books out of England--the Welsh border shouldn't be a problem since Wales aligned itself with Denmark. I don't suppose you have any ideas how to get across the English border post?"

"I'm not sure," I replied. "How many copies of banned books do you want to smuggle anyway?"

"About four truckloads."

I whistled. Things--like cheese, for instance--were usually smuggled *in* to England. I didn't know how I'd get banned books *out*.

"I'll give it a shot. What else is going on?"

"Usual stuff," replied Bowden. "Faked Milton, Jonson, Swift . . . Montague and Capulet street gangs . . . someone discovered a first draft of *The Mill on the Floss* entitled *The Splashing of the Weirs*. Also, the Daphne Farquitt Specialist Bookshop went up in smoke."

"Insurance scam?"

"No--probably anti-Farquitt protesters again."

Farquitt had penned her first bodice-ripping novel in 1932 and had been writing pretty much the same one over and over again ever since. Loved by many and hated by a vitriolic minority, Farquitt was England's leading romantic novelist.

"There's also been a huge increase in the use of performance-enhancing drugs by novelists," added Victor. "Last year's Booker speedwriting winner was stripped of his award when he tested positive for Cartlandromin. And only last week Handley Paige narrowly missed a two-year writing ban for failing a random dope test."

"Sometimes I wonder if we don't have too many rules," murmured Victor pensively, and we all three stood in silence, nodding thoughtfully for a moment.

Bowden broke the silence. He produced a piece of stained paper wrapped in a cellophane evidence bag and passed it across to me.

"What do you make of this?"

I read it, not recognizing the words but recognizing the style. It was a sonnet by Shakespeare--and a pretty good one, too.

"Shakespeare, but it's not Elizabethan--the mention of Howdy Doody would seem to indicate that--but it *feels* like his. What did the Verse Meter Analyzer say about it?"

"Ninety-one percent probability of Will as the author," replied Victor.

"Where did you get it?"

"Off the body of a down-and-out by the name of Shaxtper killed on Tuesday evening. We think someone has been cloning Shakespeares."

"Cloning Shakespeares? Are you sure? Couldn't it just be a ChronoGuard 'temporal kidnap' sort of thing?"

"No. Blood analysis tells us they were all vaccinated at birth against rubella, mumps and so forth."

"Wait--you've got more than one?"

"Three," said Bowden. "There's been something of a spate recently."

"When can you come back to work, Thursday?" asked Victor solemnly. "As you can see, we need you."

I paused for a moment. "I'm going to need a week to get my life into gear first, sir. There are a few pressing matters that I have to attend to."

"What, may I ask," said Victor, "is more important than Montague and Capulet street gangs, cloned Shakespeares, smuggling Kierkegaard out of the country and authors using banned substances?"

"Finding reliable child care."

"Goodness!" said Victor. "Congratulations! You must bring the little squawker in sometime. Mustn't she, Bowden?"

"Absolutely."

"Bit of a problem, that," murmured Victor. "Can't have you dashing around the place only to have to get home at five to make junior's tea. Perhaps we'd better handle all this on our own."

"No," I said with an assertiveness that made them both jump. "No, I'm coming back to work. I just need to sort a few things out. Does

SpecOps have a nursery?"

"No."

"Ah. Well, I suspect I shall think of something. If I get my husband back, there won't be a problem. I'll call you tomorrow."

There was a pause.

"Well, we have to respect that, I suppose," said Victor solemnly. "We're just glad that you're back. Aren't we, Bowden?"

"Yes," replied my ex-partner, "very glad indeed."

## Time Waits for No Man

SpecOps-12 is the ChronoGuard, the governmental department dealing with temporal stability. It is their job to maintain the integrity of the Standard History Eventline (SHE) and police the timestream against any unauthorized changes or usage. Their most brilliant work is never noticed, as changes in the past always seem to have been that way. It is not unusual in any one ChronoGuard work shift for history to flex dramatically before settling back down to the SHE. Planet-destroying cataclysms generally happen twice a week but are carefully rerouted by skilled ChronoGuard operatives. The citizenry never notices a thing--which is just as well, really.

Colonel Next, QT CG (nonexst.),  
*Upstream/Downstream* (unpublished)

I wasn't done with SpecOps yet. I still needed to figure out what my father had told me on our first meeting. Finding a time traveler can be fraught with difficulties, but since I passed the ChronoGuard office at almost exactly three hours from our last meeting, it seemed the obvious place to look.

I knocked at their door and, hearing no answer, walked in. When I was last working at SpecOps, we rarely heard anything from the mildly eccentric members of the time-traveling elite, but when you work in the time business, you don't waste it by nattering--it's much too precious. My father always argued that time was far and away the most valuable commodity we had and that temporal profligacy should be a criminal offense--which kind of makes watching *Celebrity Kidney Swap* or reading Daphne Farquitt novels a crime straightaway.

The room was empty and from appearances had been so for a number of years. Although, that's what it *looked* like when I first peered in--a second later some painters were decorating it for the first time, the second after that it was derelict, then full, then empty again.

It continued like this as I watched, the room jumping to various different stages in its history but never lingering for more than a few seconds on any one particular time. The ChronoGuard operatives were merely smears of light that moved and whirled about, momentarily visible to me as they jumped from past to future and future to past. If I had been a trained member of the ChronoGuard, perhaps I could have made more sense of it, but I wasn't, and couldn't.

There was one piece of furniture that remained unchanged whilst all about raced, moved and blurred in a never-ending jumble. It was a small table with an old candlestick telephone upon it. I stepped into the room and lifted the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hello," said a prerecorded voice. "You're through to the Swindon ChronoGuard. To assist with your inquiry, we have a number of choices. If you have been the victim of temporal flexation, dial one. If you wish to report a temporal anomaly, dial two. If you feel you might have been involved in a timecrime . . ."

It gave me several more choices, but nothing that told me how to contact my father. Finally, at the end of the long list, it gave me the option for meeting an operative, so I chose that. In an instant the blurred movement in the room stopped and everything fell into place--but with furniture and fittings more suited to the sixties. There was an agent sitting at the desk. A tall and undeniably handsome man in the blue uniform of the ChronoGuard, emblazoned at the shoulder with the pips of a captain. As he himself had predicted, it was my father, three hours later and three hours younger. At first he didn't recognize me.

"Hello," he said. "Can I help you?"

"It's me, Thursday."

"Thursday?" he echoed, eyes wide open as he stood up. "My daughter Thursday?"

I nodded, and he moved closer.

"My goodness!" he exclaimed, scrutinizing me with great interest. "How wonderful to see you again! How long's it been? Six centuries?"

"Two years," I told him, not wanting to confuse a confusing matter even further by mentioning our conversation this morning, "but why are you working for the ChronoGuard again? I thought you went rogue?"



"Ah!" he said, beckoning me closer and lowering his voice. "There was a change of administration, and they said they would look very closely at my grievances if I'd come and work for them at the Historical Preservation Corps. I had to take a demotion, and I won't be reactualized until the paperwork is done, but it's working out quite well otherwise. Is your husband still eradicated?"

"I'm afraid so. Any chance . . . ?"

He winced. "I'd love to, Sweetpea, but I've really got to watch my p's and q's for a few decades. Do you like the office?"

I looked at the sixties decor in the tiny room. "Bit small, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes." My father grinned, clearly in an ebullient mood. "And over seven hundred of us work here. Since we could not *all* be here at one time, we simply stretch the usage out across the timestream, like a long piece of elastic."

He stretched his arms wide as if to demonstrate.

"We call it a timeshare."

He rubbed his chin and looked around. "What's the time out there?"

"It's July fourteenth, 1988."

"That's a stroke of good fortune," he said, lowering his voice still further. "It's a good job you've turned up. They've blamed me for the 1864 war between Germany and Denmark."

"Was it your fault?"

"No--it was that clot Bismarck. But it doesn't matter. They've transferred me to another division inside the Historical Preservation Corps for a second chance. My first assignment occurs in July 1988, so local knowledge right now is a godsend. Have you heard of anyone named Yorrick Kaine?"

"He's Chancellor of England."

"That figures. Did St. Zvlkx return tomorrow?"

"He might."

"Okay. Who won the SuperHoop?"

"That's Saturday week," I explained. "It hasn't happened yet."

"Not *strictly* true, Sweetpea. Everything that we do actually happened a long, long time ago--even this conversation. The future is

already there. The pioneers that plowed the first furrows of history into virgin time line died eons ago--all we do now is try and keep it pretty much the way it should be. Have you heard of someone named Winston Churchill, by the way?"

I thought for a moment. "He was an English statesman who seriously blotted his copybook in the Great War, then was run over by a cab and killed in 1932."

"So no one of any consequence?"

"Not really. Why?"

"Ahh, no reason. Just a little pet theory of mine. Anyway, everything has already happened--if it hadn't, there'd be no need for people like me. But things go wrong. In the normal course of events, time flies back and forth from the end of and then until the beginning of now like a shuttle on a loom, weaving the threads of history together. If it encounters an obstacle, then it might just flex slightly and no change will be noticed. But if that obstacle is big enough--and Kaine is plenty big enough, believe me--then history will veer off at a tangent. And *that's* when we have to sort it out. I've been transferred to the Armageddon Avoidance Division, and we've got an apocalyptic disaster of life-extinguishing capability Level III heading your way."

There was a moment's silence.

"Does your mother know you wear your hair this short?"

"Is it meant to happen?"

"Your hair?"

"No, the Armageddon."

"Not at all. This one has an Ultimate Likelihood Index rating of only twenty-two percent: 'not very likely.' "

"Nothing like that incident with the Dream Topping, then," I observed.

"What incident?"

"Nothing."

"Right. Well, since I'm on probation--sort of--they thought they'd start me on the small stuff."

"I still don't understand."

"It's simple," began my father. "Two days after the SuperHoop,

President Formby will die of natural causes. The following day Yorrick Kaine proclaims himself Dictator of England. Two weeks after that, following the traditional suspension of the press and summary executions of former associates, Kaine will declare war on Wales. Two days after a prolonged tank battle on the Welsh Marches, the United Clans of Scotland launch an attack on Berwick-on-Tweed. In a fit of pique, Kaine carpet-bombs Glasgow, and the Swedish Empire enters on Scotland's side. Russia joins Kaine after their colonial outpost of Fetlar is sacked--and the war moves to mainland Europe. It soon escalates to an apocalyptic shoot-out between the African and American superpowers. In less than three months, the earth will be nothing but a steaming radioactive cinder. Of course," he added, "that is a worst-case scenario. It'll probably never happen, and if you and I do our jobs properly, it won't."

"Can't you just kill Kaine?"

"Not that easy. Time is the glue of the cosmos, Sweetpea, and it has to be eased apart--you'd be surprised how strongly the Historical Time Line tends to look after despots. Why do you think dictators like Pol Pot, Bokassa and Idi Amin live such long lives and people like Mozart, Jim Henson and Mother Teresa are plucked from us when relatively young?"

"I don't think Mother Teresa could be thought of as *young*."

"On the contrary--she was *meant* to live until a hundred and twenty-eight.

There was a pause.

"Okay, Dad--so what's the plan?"

"Right. It's incredibly complex and also unbelievably simple. To stop Kaine gaining power, we have to seriously disrupt his sponsor, the Goliath Corporation. Without them his power is zero. To do that we need to ensure . . . that Swindon wins the SuperHoop."

"How is that going to work?"

"It's a causality thing. Small events have large consequences. You'll see."

"No, I mean, how am I going to get Swindon to win? Apart from Kapok and Aubrey Jambe and perhaps 'Biffo' Mandible, the players are . . . well, crap--not to put too fine a point on it. Especially when you compare them to their SuperHoop opponents, the Reading Whackers."

"I'm sure you'll think of something, but keep an eye on Kapok--

they'll try to get to him first. You'll have to do this on your own, Sweetpea. I've got my own problems. It seems Nelson's getting killed at the beginning of the Battle of Trafalgar wasn't French History Revisionists after all. I talked to someone I know over at the ChronoGendarmerie, and they thought it amusing that the Revisionists should even *attempt* such a thing; advanced timestream models with Napoleon as emperor of all Europe bode very poorly for France--they're much better in the long run with things as they are meant to be."

"So who is killing Nelson?"

"Well, it's Nelson *himself*. Don't ask me why. Now, what did you want to see me about?"

I had to think carefully. "Well . . . nothing, *really*. I met you three hours ago and you said we'd spoken, so I came here to find you, so then I suppose I should ask you to figure out who's trying to kill me this morning, which you wouldn't have been able to do if I hadn't met you this morning, and I only met you this morning because I've just told you right now I might be assassinated. . . ."

Dad laughed. "It's a bit like having a tumble dryer in your head, Sweetpea. Sometimes I don't know whether I'm thening or nowing. But I'd better check this assassin out, just in case."

"Yes," I said, more confused than ever, "I suppose you should."

## **Eradications Anonymous**

### **Goliath Backs Kaine and Whig Party**

The Goliath Corporation yesterday renewed its support for Chancellor Kaine at a party to honor England's leader. At a glittering dinner attended by over five hundred heads of commerce and governmental departments, Goliath pledged to continue its support of the Chancellor. In a reply speech, Mr. Kaine gratefully acknowledged their support and announced a package of measures designed to assist Goliath in the difficult yet highly desirable change to its faith-based corporate status, as well as funding for several ongoing weapons programs, details of which have been classified.

Article in *The Toad*, July 13, 1988

Hamlet and I arrived home to find a TV news crew from Swindon-5 waiting for me outside the house.

"Miss Next," said the reporter. "Can you tell us where you've been these past two years?"

"No comment."

"You can interview *me*," said Hamlet, realizing he was something of a celebrity out here.

"And who are you?" asked the reporter, mystified.

I stared at him and his face fell.

I'm . . . I'm . . . her cousin Eddie."

"Well, Cousin Eddie, can *you* tell us where Miss Next has been for the past two years?"

"No comment."

And we walked up the garden path to the front door.

"Where have you been?" demanded my mother as we walked in the door.

"Sorry I'm late, Mum--how's the little chap?"

"Tiring. He says that his aunt Mel is a gorilla who can peel bananas with her feet while hanging from the light fixtures."

"He *talked*?"

Friday was using the time-honored international child signal to be picked up--raising his arms in the air--and when I did so, gave me a wet kiss and started to chatter away unintelligibly.

"Well, he didn't exactly *say* as much," admitted Mum, "but he drew me a picture of Aunt Mel, which is pretty conclusive."

"Aunt Mel a gorilla?" I laughed, looking at the picture, which was unequivocally of . . . well, a gorilla. "Quite an imagination, hasn't he?"

"I'd say. I found him standing on the sideboard ready to swing from the curtains. When I told him it wasn't allowed, he pointed to the picture of Aunt Mel, which I took to mean that she used to let him."

"Does she, now? I mean, did he, now?"

Pickwick walked in looking very disgruntled and wearing a bonnet made of cardboard and held together with sticky tape.

"Pickwick's a very tolerant playmate," said my mother, who was obviously not that skilled at reading dodo expressions.

"I really need to get him into a play group. Did you change his nappy?"

"Three times. It just goes straight through, doesn't it?"

I sniffed at the leg of his dungarees. "Yup. Straight through."

"Well, I've got my auto-body work group to attend to," she said, putting on her hat and taking her handbag and welding goggles from the peg, "but you'd better sort out some more reliable child care, my dear. I can do the odd hour here and there, but not whole days--and I certainly don't want to do any more nappies."

"Do you think Lady Hamilton would look after him?"

"It's possible," said my mother in the sort of voice that means the reverse. "You could always ask."

She opened the door and was plinked at angrily by Alan, who was in a bit of a bad mood and was pulling up flowers in the front garden. With unbelievable speed she grabbed him by the neck and, with a lot of angry plinking and scrabbling, deposited him unceremoniously inside the potting shed and locked the door.

"Miserable bird!" said my mother, giving me and Friday a kiss. "Have I got my purse?"

"It's in your bag."

"Am I wearing my hat?"

"Yes."

She smiled, told me that Bismarck was not to be disturbed and that I mustn't buy anything from a door-to-door salesman unless it was *truly* a bargain and was gone.

I changed Friday, then let him toddle off to find something to do. I made a cup of tea for myself and Hamlet, who had switched on the TV and was watching MOLE-TV 's Shakespeare channel. I sat on the sofa and stared out the windows into the garden. It had been destroyed by a mammoth when I was last here, and I noted that my mother had replanted it with plants that are not very palatable to the Proboscidea tongue--quite wise, considering the migrations. As I watched, Pickwick waddled past, possibly wondering where Alan had gone. For the day's work, I had done very little. I was still a Literary Detective, but twenty thousand pounds in debt and no nearer getting Landen back.

My mother returned at about eight, and the first of her Eradications Anonymous friends began to appear at nine. There were ten of them, and they started to chatter about what they described as their "lost ones" as soon as they got through the door. Emma Hamilton and I weren't alone in having a husband with an existence problem. But although it seemed my Landen and Emma's Horatio were strong in our memories, many people were not so lucky. Some had only vague feelings about someone they felt who *should* be there but wasn't. To be honest, I really didn't want to be here, but I had promised my mother and I was living in her house, so that was the end of it.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," said my mother, clapping her hands, "and if you'd all like to take a seat, we can allow this meeting to begin."

Everyone sat down, tea and Battenberg cake in hand, and looked

expectant.

"Firstly I would like to welcome a new member to the group. As you know, my daughter has been away for a couple of years--not in prison, I'd like to make that clear!"

"Thank you, Mother," I murmured under my breath as there was polite laughter from the group, who instantly assumed that's exactly where I *had* been.

"And she has kindly agreed to join our group and say a few words. Thursday?"

I took a deep breath, stood up and said quickly, "Hello, everyone. My name's Thursday Next, and my husband doesn't exist."

There was applause at this, and someone said, "Way to go, Thursday," but I couldn't think of anything to add, nor wanted to, so sat down again. There was silence as everyone stared at me, politely waiting for me to carry on.

"That's it. End of story."

"I'll drink to that!" said Emma, gazing forlornly at the locked drinks cabinet.

"You're very brave," said Mrs. Beatty, who was sitting next to me. She patted my hand in a kindly manner. "What was his name?"

"Landen. Landen Parke-Laine. He was murdered by the ChronoGuard in 1947. I'm going to the Goliath Apologarium tomorrow to try to get his eradication reversed."

There was a murmuring.

"What's the matter?"

"You must understand," said a tall and painfully thin man who up until now had remained silent, "that for you to progress in this group, you must begin to accept that this is a problem of the memory--there is no Landen; you just *think* there is."





*"You mean to tell me, Mr. Holmes, that by a scientific oddity we are in the wrong book?"*

"It's very dry in here, isn't it?" muttered Emma unsubtly, still staring at the drinks cabinet.

"I was like you once," said Mrs. Beatty, who had stopped patting my hand and returned to her knitting. "I had a wonderful life with Edgar, and then one morning I wake up in a different house with Gerald

lying next to me. He didn't believe me when I explained the problem, and I was on medication for ten years until I came here. It is only now, in the company of your good selves, am I coming to the realization that it is merely a malady of the head."

I was horrified. "Mother?"

"It's something that we must try and face, my dear."

"But Dad visits you, doesn't he?"

"Well, I *believe* he does," she said, thinking hard, "but of course when he's gone, it's only a memory. There isn't any *real* proof that he ever existed."

"What about me? And Joffy? Or even Anton? How were we born without Dad?"

She shrugged at the impossibility of the paradox. "Perhaps it was, after all," sighed my mother, "youthful indiscretions that I have expunged from my mind."

"And Emma? And Herr Bismarck? How do you explain them being here?"

"Well," said my mother, thinking hard, "I'm sure there's a rational explanation for it . . . somewhere."

"Is this what this group teaches you?" I replied angrily. "To deny the memories of your loved ones?"

I looked around at the gathering, who had, it seemed, given up in the face of the hopeless paradox that they lived every minute of their lives. I opened my mouth to try to describe eloquently just how I *knew* that Landen had once been married to me when I realized I was wasting my time. There was nothing, but *nothing*, to suggest that it was anything other than in my mind. I sighed. To be truthful, it *was* in my mind. It hadn't happened. I just had memories of how it *might* have turned out. The tall, thin man, the realist, was beginning to convince everyone they were not victims of a timeslip, but delusional.

"You want proof--"

I was interrupted by an excited knock at the front door. Whoever it was didn't waste any time; she just walked straight into the house and into the front room. It was a middle-aged woman in a floral dress who was holding the hand of a confused and acutely embarrassed-looking man.

"Hello, group!" she said happily. "It's Ralph! I got him back!"

"Ah!" said Emma. "This calls for a celebration!" Everyone ignored her.

"I'm sorry," said my mother, "have you got the right house? Or the right self-help group?"

"Yes, yes," she reasserted. "It's Julie, Julie Aseizer. I've been coming to this group every week for the past three years!"

There was silence in the group. All you could hear was the quiet click of Mrs. Beatty's knitting needles.

"Well, I haven't seen you," announced the tall, thin man. He looked around at the group. "Does *anyone* recognize this person?"

The group shook their heads blankly.

"I expect you think this is *really* funny, don't you?" said the thin man angrily. "This is a self-help group for people with severe memory aberrations, and I really don't think it is either amusing or constructive for pranksters to make fun of us! Now, please leave!"

She stood for a moment, biting her lip, but it was her husband who spoke.

"Come on, darling, I'm taking you home."

"But wait!" she said. "Now he's *back*, everything is as it *was*, and I wouldn't have needed to come to your group, so I *didn't*--yet I *remember* . . ."

Her voice trailed off, and her husband gave her a hug as she started to sob. He led her out, apologizing profusely all the while.

As soon as they had gone, the thin man sat down indignantly. "A sorry state of affairs!" he grumbled.

"Everyone thinks it's funny to do that old joke," added Mrs. Beatty. "That's the second time this month."

"It gave me a powerful thirst," added Emma. "Anyone else?"

"Maybe," I suggested, "they should start a self-help group for themselves--they could call it Eradications Anonymous *Anonymous*."

No one thought it was funny, and I hid a smile. Perhaps there would be a chance for me and Landen after all.

I didn't contribute much to the group after that, and indeed the conversation soon threaded away from eradication and onto more mundane matters, such as the latest crop of TV shows that seemed to have flourished in my absence. *Celebrity Name That Fruit!* hosted by Frankie Saveloy was a ratings topper these days, as was *Toasters from Hell* and *You've Been Stapled!*, a collection of England's funniest stationery incidents. Emma had given up all attempts at subtlety by now and was prying the lock off the drinks cabinet with a screwdriver when Friday wailed one of those ultrasonic cries that only parents can hear--makes you understand how sheep can know who's lamb is whose--and I mercifully excused myself. He was standing up in his cot rattling the bars, so I took him out and read to him until we were both fast asleep.

## Mrs. Tiggy-winkle

### Kierkegaard Book-Burning Ceremony Proves Danish Philosopher's Unpopularity

Chancellor Yorrick Kaine last night officiated at the first burning of Danish literature with the incineration of eight copies of *Fear and Trembling*, a quantity that fell far short of the expected "thirty or forty tons." When asked to comment on the apparent lack of enthusiasm among the public to torch their Danish philosophy, Kaine explained that "Kierkegaard is clearly less popular than we thought, and rightly so--next stop Hans Christian Andersen!" Kierkegaard himself was unavailable for comment, having inconsiderately allowed himself to be dead for a number of years.

Article in *The Toad*, July 14, 1988

I was dreaming that a large chain-saw-wielding elephant was sitting on me when I awoke at two in the morning. I was still fully dressed, with a snoring Friday fast asleep on my chest. I put him back in his cot and turned the bedside lamp to the wall to soften the light. My mother, for reasons known only to herself, had kept my bedroom pretty much as it was from the time I had left home. It was nostalgic, but also deeply disturbing, to see just what had interested me in my late teens. It seemed like it had been boys, music, Jane Austen and law enforcement, but not particularly in that order.

I undressed and slipped on a long T-shirt and stared at Friday's sleeping form, his lips making gentle sucky motions.

"Pssst!" said a voice close at hand. I turned. There, in the semidark, was a very large hedgehog dressed in a pinafore and bonnet. She was keeping a close lookout at the door and, after giving me a wan smile, crept to the window and peeked out.

"Whoa!" she breathed in wonderment. "Streetlights are *orange*."

Never would have thought *that!*"

"Mrs. Tiggy-winkle," I said, "I've only been gone two days!"

"Sorry to bother you," she said, curtsying quickly and absently folding my shirt, which I had tossed over a chair back, "but there are one or two things going on that I thought you should know about--and you did say that if I had any questions, to ask."

"Okay--but not here; we'll wake Friday."

So we crept downstairs to the kitchen. I pulled down the blinds before turning the lights on, as a six-foot hedgehog in a bonnet might have caused a few eyebrows to be raised in the neighborhood--no one wore bonnets in Swindon these days.

I offered Mrs. Tiggy-winkle a seat at the table. Although she, Emperor Zhark and Bradshaw had been put in charge of running Jurisfiction in my absence, none of them had the leadership skills necessary to do the job on their own. And while the Council of Genres refused to concede that my absence was anything but "compassionate leave," a new Bellman was yet to be elected in my place.

"So what's up?" I asked.

"Oh, Miss Next!" she wailed, her spines bristling with vexation. "Please come back!"

"I have things to deal with out here," I explained. "You all know that!"

"I know," she sighed, "but Emperor Zhark threw a tantrum when I suggested he spend a little less time conquering the universe and a little more time at Jurisfiction. The Red Queen won't do anything post-1867, and Vernham Deane is tied up with the latest Daphne Farquitt novel. Commander Bradshaw does his own thing, which leaves me in charge--and someone left a saucer of bread and milk on my desk this morning."

"It was probably just a joke."

"Well, I'm not laughing," replied Mrs. Tiggy-winkle indignantly.

"By the way," I said as a thought suddenly struck me, "did you find out which book Yorrick Kaine escaped from?"

"I'm afraid not. The Cat is searching unpublished novels in the Well of Lost Plots at the moment, but it might take a little time. You know how chaotic things are down there."

"Only too well." I sighed, thinking about my old home in unpublished fiction with a mixture of fondness and relief. The Well was where books are actually constructed, where plottsmiths create the stories that authors *think* they write. You can buy plot devices at discount rates and verbs by the pint. An odd place, to be sure. "Okay," I said finally, "you'd better tell me what's going on."

"Well," said Mrs. Tiggy-winkle, counting the points out on her claw, "this morning a rumor of potential change in the copyright laws swept through the BookWorld."

"I don't know how these rumors get started," I replied wearily. "Was there any truth in it?"

"Not in the least."

This was a contentious subject to the residents of the BookWorld. The jump to copyright-free Public Domain Status had always been a fearful prospect for a book character, and even with support groups and training courses to soften the blow, the Narrative Menopause could take some getting used to. The problem is that copyright laws tend to vary around the world, and sometimes characters are in public domain in one market and not in another, which is confusing. Then there is the possibility that the law might change and characters who had adjusted themselves to a Public Domain Status would find themselves in copyright again, or vice versa. Unrest in the BookWorld in these matters is palpable; it only takes a small spark to set off a riot.

"So all was well?"

"Pretty much."

"Good. Anything else?"

"Starbucks wants to open another coffee shop in the Hardy Boys series."

"Another one?" I asked with some surprise. "There's already sixteen. How much coffee do they think they can drink? Tell them they can open another in *Mrs. Dalloway* and two more in *The Age of Reason*. After that, no more. What else?"

"The Tailor of Gloucester needs three yards of cherry-colored silk to finish the Mayor's embroidered coat--but he's got a cold and can't go out."

"Who are we? Interlink? Tell him to send his cat, Simpkin."

"Okay."

There was a pause.

"You didn't come all this way to tell me bad news about Kaine, copyright panics and cherry-colored twist, now, did you?"

She looked at me and sighed. "There's a bit of a problem with Hamlet."

"I know. But he's doing a favor for my mother at the moment. I'll send him back in a few days."

"Um," replied the hedgehog nervously. "It's a bit more complex than that. I think it might be a good idea if you kept him out here for a bit longer."

"What's going on?" I asked suspiciously.

"It wasn't my fault!" she burst out, reaching for her pocket handkerchief. "I thought the Internal Plot Adjustment request was to sort out the seasonal anomalies! All that death in the orchard, then winter, then flowers--"

"What happened?" I asked again.

Mrs. Tiggy-winkle looked miserable.

"Well, you know there has been much grumbling unrest within *Hamlet* ever since Rosencrantz and Guildenstern got their own play?"

"Yes?"

"Well, just after you left, Ophelia attempted a coup de etat in Hamlet's absence. She imported a B-6 Hamlet from *Lamb's Shakespeare* and convinced him to reenact some of the key scenes with a pro-Ophelia bias."

"And?"

"Well," said Mrs. Tiggy-winkle, "they retitled it: *The Tragedy of the Fair Ophelia, Driven Mad by the Callous Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*."

"She's always up to something, isn't she? I'll give her 'Hey nonny, nonny.' Tell her to get back into line or we'll slap a Class II Fiction Infraction on her so fast it will make her head spin."

"We tried that, but Laertes returned from Paris and lent his voice to the revolution. Together they made some *more* changes, and it is now called *The Tragedy of the Noble Laertes, Who Avenges His Sister, the Fair Ophelia, Driven Mad by the Callous and Murderous Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*."



I ran my fingers through what remained of my hair. "So . . . arrest them both?"

"Too late. Their father, Polonius, was in a 'have a go' mood and joined in. He *also* made changes, and together they renamed it: *The Tragedy of the Very Witty and Not Remotely Boring Polonius, Father of the Noble Laertes, Who Avenges His Fair Sister, Ophelia, Driven Mad by the Callous, Murderous and Outrageously Disrespectful Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.*"

"What was it like?"

"With Polonius? Very . . . *wordy*. We could replace them all," carried on Mrs. Tiggy-winkle, "but changing so many major players in one swoop might cause irreparable damage. The last thing we need right now is Hamlet coming back and sticking his oar in--you know how mad he gets when anybody even *suggests* a word change."

"Right," I said, "here's the plan. This is all happening in the 1623 folio edition, yes?"

Mrs. Tiggy-winkle nodded her head.

"Okay. Move *Hamlet*--or whatever it is called at present--to a disused Storycode Engine and fire up *The Penguin Modern Hamlet* so that is the one everyone in the Outland will read. It will give us some breathing space without anyone seeing the Polonized version. It won't be at its best, but it'll have to do. Horatio must still be on Hamlet's side, surely?"

"Most definitely."

"Then deputize him to Jurisdiction and try to get him to convince the Polonius family to attend an arbitration session. Keep me posted. I'll try to keep Hamlet amused out here."

She made a note.

"Is that all?" I asked.

"Not unless you need some washing done."

"I have a mother who will fight you for that. Now, please, please, Mrs. Tiggy-winkle, you must leave me to sort out Kaine and get my husband back!"

"You're right," she said after a short pause. "We're going to handle this all on our own."

"Good."

"Right."

"Well . . . good night, then."

"Yes," said the hedgehog, "good night."

She stood there on the kitchen linoleum, tapping her paws together and staring at the ceiling.

"Tiggy, what is it?"

"It's *Mr.* Tiggy-winkle!" she burst out at last. "He came home late last night in a state of shock and smelling of car exhaust, and I'm so worried!"

It was about three in the morning when I was finally left alone with my thoughts, a sleeping son and a pocket handkerchief drenched with hedgehog tears.

## **The Greatness of St. Zvlkx**

### **Goliath Corporation Implements "Distraction Reduction" Program**

Accusations were growing yesterday that the corporation's drive to increase productivity would result in the loss of civil liberties. This was strongly denied by Goliath, who commented, "We don't see bricking up the million or so windows in our ten thousand work facilities as anything less than a positive step forward. By removing windows we aim to help the worker who might be suffering from interest-in-work deficit disorder to higher levels of self-help and greater productivity. We also think that it will save thousands of gallons of Windex and the estimated six hundred deaths suffered by window cleaners every year." Accusations that the corporation was "nothing short of a bunch of bullies" were met with a three-hundred-page writ for defamation, delivered personally by very big men with tattoos.

Article in *The Toad on Sunday*, July 3, 1988

From humble beginnings in 1289 to a fiery end in the autumn of 1536, the towering beauty of the Great Cathedral of Swindon was once the equal of Canterbury or York, but no longer. Built over at least four times since then, the site of the cathedral was now occupied by a temple of another kind: Tesco's. Where monks once moved silently to prayer beneath vaulted cloisters, you can now buy Lola Vavoom workout videos, and where the exquisite stained-glass east window once brought forth tears from the coldest heart, there is now a refrigerated display boasting five different types of smoked sausage.

I took my seat and placed Friday on my lap, and he wriggled while I looked around. The car park was full of eager spectators. Some, like myself, were sitting on the especially constructed tiered seating, the rest standing behind barriers on the asphalt. But everyone, sitting or

standing, was facing a small fenced-off area sandwiched between the shopping-trolley return point and the ATM machines. This small area contained a weathered arched doorway, the only visible remnant of Swindon's once great monastic settlement.

"How are you doing?" asked Joffy, who, as well as being a minister for the GSD and several other smaller denominations, was also head of the Idolatry Friends of St. Zvlkx.

"Fine. Isn't that Lydia Startright?"

I was pointing at a well-dressed female reporter readying herself for a broadcast.

"She's about to interview me. How do I look?"

"Very . . . ecclesiastical."

"Good. Excuse me."

He straightened his dog collar and walked over to join Lydia. She was standing next to her producer, a small and curiously unappealing man who was so unoriginal of thought that he still considered it cool and desirable for people in the media to wear black.

"What time is old Zvlkxy due to appear?" the producer asked Joffy.

"In about five minutes."

"Good. Lyds, we better go live."

Lydia composed herself, took one more look at her notes, awaited the count-in of the producer, gave a welcoming smile and began.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, this is Lydia Startright for Toad News Network, reporting live from Swindon. In under five minutes, St. Zvlkx, the obscure and sometimes controversial thirteenth-century saint, is due to be resurrected here, live on regional TV."

She turned to indicate the weathered pieces of stone, previously ignored by thousands of shoppers but now the center of attention.

"On this spot once stood the towering Cathedral of Swindon, founded by St. Zvlkx in the thirteenth century. Where the wet fish counter now stands was where St. Zvlkx penned his Book of Revelments containing seven sets of prophecies, five of which have already come true. To help us through the quagmire of claims and counterclaims I have with me the Very Irreverent Joffy Next, head of the church of the Global Standard Deity here in Swindon, speaker at

the the Idolatry Friends of St. Zvlkx and something of an expert in things Zvlkxian. Hello, Joffy, welcome to the show."

"Thank you, Lydia," said Joffy. "We're all big fans of yours at the GSD."

"Thank you. So tell me, what exactly are the revealments?"

"Well," he began, "details are understandably vague, but St. Zvlkx wrote a number of predictions in a small book before he vanished in a 'cleansing fire' in 1292. An incomplete copy of the revealments is in the Swindon City Library, but unlike the work of most of the other seers, who make vague and sweeping generalizations that are open to interpretation, St. Zvlkx's predictions are refreshingly specific."

"Perhaps you could give us an example?"

"Of course. Part of Zvlkx's Revealment the First tells us that 'a lowly butcher's son from the town of Ipswich will rise to be Lord Chancellor. His name shall be Tommy Wolsey, and he will be inaugurated the day before Christmas, and shall get only one present, not two, as should be his right. . . .'"

"That's uncannily accurate!" breathed Lydia.

"Indeed--existing letters from Cardinal Wolsey indicate most strongly that he was 'vexed and annoyed' at having to make do with only one present, something which he often spoke about and might have contributed, many years later, to his failure to persuade the Pope to grant Henry VIII an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon."

"Remarkable," said Lydia. "What else?"

"Well," continued Joffy, "Zvlkx's Revealment the Second told us that 'it shall be known as the "Sail of the Century"--an armada of over a hundred ships smelling of paella shall cross the Channel. Fire and wind will conspire to destroy them, England shall remain free.'"

"Not *quite* so good," said Lydia.

"I agree," replied Joffy. "Paella wasn't invented until *after* the Spanish Armada. There are the odd mistakes, but even so, his accuracy is astonishing. Not only do his revealments include names and dates but also, on one occasion, a reliable phone number for a good time in Leeds. By the end of the sixteenth century, St. Zvlkx had been afforded that rare hallmark of unbridled Elizabethan success--the commemorative plate. By the time of his next revealment a century and a half later, his supporters and followers had dwindled to only a

handful. But when it arrived, this Revealment the Third catapulted Zvlkx back into the world's headlines: 'In seventeen hundred and seventy-six, a George King numbered three will lose his mind, his largest colony, and his socks. The colony would grow to be the greatest power in the world, but his mind and his socks will stay lost.'

"And the fourth?"

" 'A man named after a form of waterproof shoe shall trounce a short Frenchman in Belgium.' "

"Clearly Waterloo--and the fifth?"

" 'The evil yet nattily dressed aggressors known as Nasis, whose fear has polarized the nation, will be ejected from these islands by--and I know this sounds really weird--the colony that was mentioned in prediction three. And Denis Compton will score 3,816 runs for Middlesex in a single season.' "

"Uncanny," murmured Lydia. "How would a thirteenth-century monk know that Compton batted for Middlesex?"

"He was, and indeed might be again, the greatest of seers," replied Joffy.

"We know that his Revealment the Sixth was a prediction of his own second coming, but it is the sports fans of Swindon who will really be bowled over by his Revealment the Seventh."

"Exactly so," replied Joffy. "According to the incomplete Codex Zvlkxus, it shall be 'There will be a home win on the playing fields of Swindonne in nineteen hundred and eighty-eight, and in consequence of . . .' There is more, but it's been lost. We can ask him about it when he reappears."

"Fascinating stuff, Irrev. Next! Just one question. Where is he?"

I looked at my watch as Friday stood on my lap and stared that unnerving sort of two-year-old stare at the couple behind us. St. Zvlkx was already three minutes late, and I saw Joffy bite his lip nervously. They had made much of the Great Man's predictions, and for him not to turn up would be just plain embarrassing--not to mention costly. Joffy had spent a great deal of Mum's savings learning Old English at the local adult-education center.

"Tell me, Irrev. Next," continued Lydia, trying to pad out the interview. "I understand that the Toast Marketing Board has secured a sponsorship deal with St. Zvlkx?"

"Indeed," replied Joffy. "We at the Idolatry Friends of St. Zvlkx have secured on his behalf a very favorable deal with Toast, who wanted to have exclusive rights to his likeness and wisdom, if he has any."

"Nevertheless, I understand that the Goliath Corporation was also said to be interested?"

"Not really. Goliath has been less than enthusiastic since their sportswear division paid over two hundred fifty thousand pounds for an exclusive sponsorship deal with St. Bernadette of Lincoln. But since her return six months ago, she has done nothing except brick herself up in a room and pray in silent retrospection, something that doesn't lend itself to selling running shoes. The Toast Marketing Board, on the other hand, made no such demands--they are happy just to see what Zvlkx himself would like to do for them."

Lydia turned back to the camera. "Astonishing. If you've just joined us, I'm speaking from the live telecast of the second coming of the thirteenth-century saint Thomas Zvlkx."

I looked at my watch again. Zvlkx was now five minutes late. Lydia carried on her live broadcast, interviewing several other people to soak up time. The crowd grew slightly impatient, and a low murmuring started to arise from the expectant silence. Lydia had just asked a style guru about the sort of clothes they might be expecting Zvlkx to be wearing when she was interrupted by a shout. Something was happening just outside Tesco's between the child's coin-in-the-slot flying-elephant ride and the letterbox. Joffy vaulted over the press enclosure and ran towards where a column of smoke was rising from a crack that had opened up in the mother-and-child parking area. The sky grew dark, birds stopped singing and shoppers coming out of the revolving doors stared in astonishment as a bolt of lightning struck the weathered stone arch and split it asunder. There was a collective cry of alarm as a wind sprang up from nowhere. Pennants advertising new Saver product lines that were hanging limply on the flagpoles opened with a crack, and a whirling mass of dust and wastepaper spread across the car park, making several people cough.

Within a few moments, it was all over. Sitting on the ground and dressed in a rough habit tied with a rope at the waist was a grubby man with a scraggy beard and exceptionally bad teeth. He blinked and looked curiously around at his new surroundings.

"Welcome," said Joffy, the first on the scene. "I represent the Idolatry Friends of St. Zulkx and offer you protection and guidance."

The thirteenth-century monk looked at Joffy with his dark eyes,

then at the crowds who had gathered closer to him, all of them talking and pointing and asking him if they could have their pictures taken with him.

"Your accent is not bad," replied St. Zvlkx slowly. "Is this 1988?"

"It is, sir. I've brokered a sponsorship deal for you with the Toast Marketing Board."

"Cash?"

Joffy nodded.

"Thank \*&PS@ for that," said Zvlkx. "Has the ale improved since I've been away?"

"Not much. But the choice is better."

"Can't wait. Hubba-hubba! Who's the moppet in the tight blouse?"

"Mr. Next," interjected Lydia, who had managed to push her way to the front, "perhaps you would be good enough to tell us what Mr. Zvlkx is saying?"

"I . . . um, welcomed him to the twentieth century and said we had much to learn from him as regards beekeeping and the lost art of brewing mead. He . . . um, said just then that he is tired after his journey and wants only world peace, bridges between nations and a good home for orphans, kittens and puppies."

The crowd suddenly parted to make way for the Mayor of Swindon. St. Zvlkx knew power when he saw it and smiled a greeting to Lord Volescamper, who walked briskly up and shook the monk's grimy hand.

"Look here, welcome to the twentieth century, old salt," said Volescamper, wiping his hand on his handkerchief. "How are you finding it?"

"Welcome to our age," translated Joffy. "How are you enjoying your stay?"

"Cushty, me old cocker babe," replied the saint simply.

"He says, 'Very well, thank you.'"

"Tell the worthy saint that we have a welcome pack awaiting him in the presidential suite at the Finis Hotel. Knowing his aversion to comfort, we took the liberty of removing all carpets, drapes, sheets and towels and replaced the bedclothes with hemp sacks stuffed with



rocks."

"What did the old fart say?"

"You don't want to know."

"What about the incomplete Seventh Revealment?" asked Lydia.  
"Can St. Zvlkx tell us anything about that?"

Joffy swiftly translated, and St. Zvlkx rummaged in the folds of his blanket and produced a small leatherbound book. The crowd fell silent as he licked a grubby finger, turned to the requisite page and read:

" 'There will be a home win on the playing fields of Swindonne in nineteen hundred and eighty-eight, and in consequence of this, and only in consequence of this, a great tyrant and the company named Goliathe will fall.' "

All eyes switched to Joffy, who translated. There was a sharp intake of breath and a clamor of questions.

"Mr. Zvlkx," said a reporter from *The Mole* who up until that moment had been bored out of his skull, "do you mean to say that Goliath will be lost if Swindon wins the SuperHoop?"

"That is exactly what he says," replied Joffy.

There was a further clamor of questions from the assembled journalists as I carefully tried to figure out the repercussions of this new piece of intelligence. Dad had said that a SuperHoop win for Swindon would avert an Armageddon, and if what Zvlkx was saying came true, a triumph on Saturday would do precisely this. The question was, how? There was no connection as far as I could see. I was still trying to think how a croquet final could unseat a near dictator and destroy one of the most powerful multinationals on the planet, when Lord Volescamper intervened and silenced the noisy crowd of newsmen with a wave of his hand.

"Mr. Next, thank the gracious saint for his words. There is time enough to muse on his revealment, but right now I would like him to meet members of the Swindon Chamber of Commerce, which, I might add, is sponsored by St. Biddulph's(r) Hundreds and Thousands, the cake decoration of choice. After that we might take some tea and carrot cake. Would he be agreeable to that?"

Joffy translated every word, and Zvlkx smiled happily.

"Look here, St. Zvlkx," said Volescamper as they walked towards the marquee for tea and scones, "what was the thirteenth century like?"

"The Mayor wants to know what the thirteenth century was like--and no lip, sunshine."

"Filthy, damp, disease-ridden and pestilential."

"He said it was like London, Your Grace."

St. Zvlkx looked at the weathered arch, the only visible evidence of his once great cathedral and asked, "What happened to my cathedral?"

"Burned during the dissolution of the monasteries."

"Hot damn," he muttered, eyebrows raised, "should haue seen that coming."

"Duis aute dolor in fugiat nulla pariatur," murmured Friday, pointing at St. Zvlkx's retreating form, rapidly vanishing in a crowd of well-wishers and newsmen.

"I have no idea, Sweetheart--but I've a feeling things are just beginning to get interesting."

"Well," said Lydia to the camera, "a revealment that could spell potential disaster for the Goliath Corporation and--"

Her producer was gesticulating wildly for her not to connect "Tyrant" with "Kaine" live on air.

"--an as-yet-unnamed tyrant. This is Lydia Startright, bringing you a miraculous event live for Toad News. And now a word from our sponsors, Goliath Pharmaceuticals, the makers of Hemmorrelief."

## Spike and Cindy

**Operative Spike Stoker** was with SO-17, the Vampire and Werewolf Disposal Operations. Undeniably employed in the loneliest of the SpecOps divisions, SO-17 operatives worked in the twilight world of the semidead, changelings, vampires, lycanthropes and those of a generally evil disposition. Stoker had been decorated more times than I had read *Three Men in a Boat*, but then he was the only staker in the southwest, and no one in his right mind would do what he did on a SpecOps wage, except me. And only then when I was desperate for the cash.

Thursday Next, *Thursday Next: A Life in SpecOps*

Deep in thought, I pushed Friday back towards my car. The stakes had just been raised, and any chance that I might somehow influence the outcome of the SuperHoop was suddenly made that much more impossible. With Goliath and Kaine both having a vested interest in making sure the Swindon Mallets lost, chances of our victory had dropped from "highly unlikely" to "nigh impossible."

"It explains," said a voice, "why Goliath is changing to a faith-based corporate-management system."

I turned to find my stalker, Millon de Floss, walking close behind me. It must have been important for him to contravene the blanket restraining order. I stopped for a moment. "Why do you think that?"

"Once they are a religion, they won't be a 'company named Goliathe' as stated in Zvlkx's prophecy," observed Millon, "and they can avoid the revealment's coming true. Sister Bettina, their own corporate precog, must have foreseen something like this and alerted them."

"Does that mean," I asked slowly, "that they're taking St. Zvlkx seriously?"

"He's too accurate not to be, Miss Next, however unlikely it may seem. Now that they know the complete Seventh Revealment, they'll

try to do anything to stop Swindon's winning--and continue with the religion thing as a backup, just in case."

It made sense--sort of. Dad must have known this or something very like it. None of it boded very well, but my father had said the likelihood of this Armageddon was only 22 percent, so the answer must be somewhere.

"I'm going to visit Goliathopolis this afternoon," I said slowly. "Have you found out anything about Kaine?"

Millon rummaged in his pocket for a notepad, found it and flicked through the pages, which seemed to be full of numbers.

"It's here somewhere," he said apologetically. "I like to collect vacuum-cleaner serial numbers and was investigating a rare Hoover XB-23E when I got the call. Here it is. This Kaine fellow is a conspiracist's delight. He arrived on the scene five years ago with no past, no history, no parents--nothing. His national insurance number wasn't given to him until 1982, and it seems the only jobs he has ever held were with his publishing company and then as MP."

"Not a lot to go on, then."

"Not yet, but I'll keep digging. You might be interested to know that he has been seen on several occasions with Lola Vavoom."

"Who hasn't?"

"Agreed. You wanted to know about Mr. Schitt-Hawse? He heads the Goliath tech division."

"You sure?"

Millon looked dubious for a moment.

"In the conspiracy industry, the word 'sure' has a certain plasticity about it, but yes. We have a mole at Goliathopolis. Admittedly our mole only serves in the canteen, but you'd be surprised the sensitive information that one can overhear giving out shortbread fingers. Apparently Schitt-Hawse has been engaged in something called the Ovitron Project. We're not positive, but it might be a development of your uncle's Ovinator. Could it be something along the lines of *The Midwich Cuckoos*?"

"I sincerely hope not."

I made a few notes, thanked Millon for his time and pushed Friday back to my car, my head full of potential futures, Ovinators and Kaine.

Ten minutes later we were in my Speedster, heading north towards Cricklade. My father had told me that Cindy would fail to kill me three times before she died herself, but there was a chance the future didn't have to turn out that way--after all, I had once been shot dead by a SpecOps marksman in an alternative future, and I was still very much alive.

I hadn't seen Spike for more than two years but had been gratified to learn he had moved out of his dingy apartment to a new address in Cricklade. I soon found his street--it was on a newly built estate of Cotswold stone that shone a warm glow of ocher in the sunlight. As we drove slowly down the road checking door numbers, Friday helpfully pointed out things of interest.

"Ipsum," he said, pointing at a car.

I was hoping that Spike wasn't there so I could speak to Cindy on her own, but I was out of luck. I parked up behind his SpecOps black-and-white and climbed out. Spike himself was sitting on a deck chair on the front lawn, and my heart fell when I saw that not only had he married Cindy but they had also had a child--a one-year-old girl was sitting on the grass next to him playing under a parasol. I cursed inwardly as Friday hid behind my leg. I was going to have to make Cindy play ball--the alternative wouldn't be good for her and would be worse for Spike and their daughter.

"Yo!" yelled Spike, telling the person on the other end of the phone to hold it one moment and getting up to give me a hug. "How you doing, Next?"

"I'm good, Spike, you?"

He spread his arms, indicating the trappings of middle-England suburbia. The UPVC double glazing, the well-kept lawn, the drive, the wrought-iron sunrise gate.

"Look at all this, sister! Isn't it the best?"

"Ipsum," said Friday, pointing at a plant pot.

"Cute kid. Go on in. I'll be with you in a moment."

I walked into the house and found Cindy in the kitchen. She had an apron on and her hair tied up.

"Hello," I said, trying to sound as normal as possible, "you must be Cindy."

She stared me straight in the eye. She didn't look like a professional assassin who had killed sixty-seven times--sixty-eight if she did Samuel Pring--yet the really good ones never do.

"Well, well, Thursday Next," she said slowly, crouching down to pull some damp clothes out of the washing machine and tweaking Friday's ear. "Spike holds you in very high regard."

"Then you know why I'm here?"

She put down the washing and picked up a Fisher-Price Webster that was threatening to trip someone up, and passed it to Friday, who sat down to scrutinize it carefully.

"I can guess. Handsome lad. How old is he?"

"He was two last month. And I'd like to thank you for missing yesterday."

She gave a wan smile and walked out the backdoor. I caught up with her as she started to hang the washing on the line.

"Is it Kaine trying to have me killed?"

"I always respect client confidentiality," she said quietly, "and I can't miss forever."

"Then stop it right now," I said. "Why do you even need to do it at all?"

She pegged a blue romper on the line.

"Two reasons: first, I'm not going to give up work just because I'm married with a kid, and second, I always complete a contract, no matter what. When I don't deliver the goods, the clients want refunds. And the Windowmaker doesn't do refunds."

"Yes," I replied, "I was curious about that. Why the Windowmaker?"

She glared at me coldly. "The printers made a mistake on the notepaper, and it would have cost too much to redo. Don't laugh."

She hung up a pillowcase.

"I'll contract you out, Miss Next, but I won't try today--which gives you some time to get yourself together and leave town once and for all. Somewhere where I can't find you. And hide well--I'm very good at what I do."

She took a sideways glance towards the kitchen. I hung up a large SO-17 T-shirt on the line.

"He doesn't know, does he?" I asked.

"Spike is a fine man," replied Cindy, "just a little slow on the uptake. You're not going to tell him, and he's never going to know. Grab the other end of that sheet, will you?"

I took the end of a dry sheet, and we folded it together.

"I'm not going anywhere, Cindy," I told her, "and I'll protect myself in any way I can."

We stared at one another for a moment. It seemed like such a waste.

"Retire!"

"Never!"

"Why?"

"Because I *like* it and I'm *good* at it--would you like some tea, Thursday?"

Spike had entered the garden carrying the baby. "So how are my two favorite ladies?"

"Thursday was helping me with the washing, Spikey," said Cindy, her hard-as-nails professionalism replaced with a silly sort of girly ditziness. "I'll put the kettle on--two sugars, Thursday?"

"One."

She skipped into the house.

"What do you think?" asked Spike in a low tone. "Isn't she just the cutest thing ever?"

He was like a fifteen-year-old in love for the first time.

"She's lovely, Spike. You're a lucky man."

"This is Betty," said Spike, waving the tiny arm of the infant with his huge hand. "One year old. You were right about being honest with Cindy--she didn't mind me doing all that vampire sh--I mean *stuff*. In fact, I think she's kinda proud."

"You're a lucky man," I repeated, wondering just how I was going to avoid making him a widower and the gurgling child motherless.

We walked back into the house, where Cindy was busying herself in the kitchen.

"Where have you been?" asked Spike, depositing Betty next to

Friday, where they looked at one another suspiciously. "Prison?"

"No. Somewhere weird. Somewhere *other*."

"Will you be returning there?" asked Cindy innocently.

"She's only just got back!" exclaimed Spike. "We don't want to be shot of her quite yet."

"Shot of her--of course not," replied Cindy, placing a mug of tea on the table. "Have a seat. There are Hobnobs in that novelty dodo biscuit tin over there."

"Thank you."

"So," I continued, "how's the vampire business?"

"So-so. Been quiet recently. Werewolves the same. I dealt with a few zombies in the city center the other night, but Supreme Evil Being containment work has almost completely dried up. There has been a report of a few ghouls, bogeys and phantoms in Winchester, but it's not really my area of expertise. There is talk of disbanding the division and then taking me on freelance when they need something done."

"Is that bad?"

"Not really. I can charge what I want with vampires on the prowl--but in slack times I'd be a bit stuffed. Wouldn't want to send Cindy out to work full-time, now, would I?"

He laughed, and Cindy laughed with him, handing a rusk to Betty, who gave it an almighty toothless bite and then looked puzzled when there was no effect. Friday took it off her and showed how it was done.

"So what are you up to at present?" asked Spike.

"Not much. I was just dropping in before I went off up to Goliathopolis--my husband still isn't back."

"Did you hear about Zvlkx's revealment?"

"I was there."

"Then Goliath will want all the forgiveness they can get--you won't find a better time for forcing them to bring him back."

We chatted for ten minutes or more until it was time for me to leave. I didn't manage to speak to Cindy on her own again, but I had said what I wanted to say--I just hoped she would take notice, but somehow I doubted it.



"If I ever have any freelance jobs to do, will you join me?" asked Spike as he was seeing me out the door, Friday having nearly eaten all the rusks.

I thought of my overdraft. "Please."

"Good," replied Spike, "I'll be in touch."

I drove down the M4 to Saknussum International, where I had to run to catch the Gravitube to the James Tarbuck Graviport in Liverpool. Friday and I had a brief lunch before hopping on the shuttle to Goliathopolis. Goliath took my husband from me, and they could bring him back. And when you have a grievance with a company, you go straight to the top.

## The Goliath Apologarium

### Danish Car a "Deathtrap," Claims Kainian Minister

Robert Edsel, the Kainian minister of road safety, hit out at Danish car manufacturer Volvo yesterday, claiming the boxy and unsightly vehicle previously considered one of the safest cars on the market to be the complete reverse--a death trap for anyone stupid enough to buy one. "The Volvo fared very poorly in the rocket-propelled grenade test," claimed Mr. Edsel in a press release yesterday, "and owners and their children risk permanent spinal injury when dropped in the car from heights as low as sixty feet." Mr. Edsel continued to pour scorn on the pride of the Danish motoring industry by revealing that the Volvo's air filters offered "scant protection" against pyroclastic flows, poisonous fumes and other forms of common volcanic phenomena. "I would very much recommend that anyone thinking of buying this poor Danish product should think again," said Mr. Edsel. When the Danish foreign minister pointed out that Volvos were, in fact, Swedish, Mr. Edsel accused the Danes of once again attempting to blame their neighbors for their own manufacturing weaknesses.

Article in *The Toad on Sunday*, July 16, 1988

The Isle of Man had been an independent corporate state within England since it was appropriated for the greater fiscal good in 1963. The surrounding Irish Sea was heavily mined to deter unwanted visitors and the skies above protected by the most technologically advanced anti-aircraft system known to man. It had hospitals and schools, a university, its own fusion reactor and also, leading from Douglas to the Kennedy Graviport in New York, the world's only privately run Gravitube. The Isle of Man was home to almost two hundred thousand people who did nothing but support, or support the support, of the one enterprise that dominated the small island: the Goliath Corporation.

The old Manx town of Laxey was renamed Goliathopolis and was now the Hong Kong of the British archipelago, a forest of glassy towers striding up the hillside towards Snaefell. The largest of these skyscrapers rose higher even than the mountain peak behind and could be seen glinting in the sunlight all the way from Blackpool, weather permitting. In this building was housed the inner sanctum of the whole vast multinational, the cream of Goliath's corporate engineers. An employee could spend a lifetime on the island and never even get past the front desk. And it was on the ground floor of this building, right at the heart of the corporation, that I found the Goliath Apologarium.

I joined a small queue in front of a modern glass-topped table where two happy, smiling Goliath employees were giving out questionnaires and numbered tickets.

"Hello!" said the clerk, a youngish girl with a lopsided smile. "Welcome to the Goliath Corporation's Apology Emporium. Sorry you had to wait. How can we help you?"

"The Goliath Corporation murdered my husband."

"How simply dreadful!" she responded in a lame and insincere display of sympathy. "I'm so sorry to hear that. Goliath, as part of our move to a faith-based corporate-management system, is committed to reversing all the unpleasant matters we might have previously been engaged in. You need to fill in this form, and this form--and Section D of this one--and then take a seat. We'll get one of our highly trained apologists to see you just as soon as they can."

She handed me several long forms and a numbered ticket, then indicated a door to one side. I opened the door of the Apologarium and walked in. It was a large hall with floor-to-ceiling windows that gave a serene view of the Irish Sea. On one side was a row of perhaps twenty cubicles containing suited apologists, all listening intently to what they were being told with the same sad and contrite expression. On the other side were rows upon rows of wooden seating that held eager and once bullied citizens, anxiously clasping their numbered tickets and patiently waiting their turn. I looked at my ticket. It was number 6,174. I glanced up at the board, which told me that number 836 was now being interviewed.

"Dear, sweet people!" said a voice through a tannoy. "Goliath is deeply sorry for all the harm it might inadvertently have caused you in the past. Here at the Goliath Apologarium we are only too happy to assist in your problem, no matter how small--"

"You!" I said to a man who was hobbling past me towards the exit. "Has Goliath repented to your satisfaction?"

"Well, they didn't really need to," he replied blandly. "It was I who was at fault--in fact, *I* apologized for wasting their valuable time!"

"What did they do?"

"They bathed my neighborhood with ionizing radiation, then denied it for seventeen years, even after people's teeth fell out and I grew a third foot."

"And you forgave them?"

"Of course. I can see now that it was a genuine accident and the public has to accept equal risks if we are to have abundant clean energy, limitless food and household electrodefragmentizers."

He was carrying a sheaf of papers, not the application form that I had to fill out but leaflets on how to join New Goliath. Not as a consumer but as a *worshipper*. I had always been deeply distrustful of Goliath, but this whole "repentance" thing smelt worse than anything I had so far witnessed. I turned, tore up my numbered ticket and headed for the exit.

"Miss Next!" called out a familiar voice. "I say, Miss Next!"

A short man with pinched features and a rounded head covered with the fuzz of an aggressively short crew cut was facing me. He was wearing a dark suit and heavy gold jewelry and was arguably the person I liked least--this was Jack Schitt, once Goliath's top advanced-weapons guru and ex-convict of "The Raven." This was the man who had tried to prolong the Crimean War so he could make a fortune out of Goliath's latest superweapon, the Plasma Rifle.

Anger rose quickly within me. I turned Friday in the other direction so as not to give his young mind any wrong ideas about the use of violence and then grasped Schitt by the throat. He took a step back, stumbled and collapsed beneath me with a yelp. Sensing I had been in this position before, I released him and placed my hand on the butt of my automatic, expecting to be attacked by a host of Jack's minders. But there was nothing. Just sad citizens looking on sorrowfully.

"There is no one here to help me," said Jack Schitt, slowly getting to his feet. "I have been assaulted eight times today--I count myself fortunate. Yesterday it was twenty-three."

I looked at him and noticed, for the first time, that he had a black eye and a cut on his lip.

"No minders?" I echoed. "Why?"

"It is my absolution to face those I have bullied and harangued in the past, Miss Next. When we last met, I was head of Goliath's Advanced Weapons Division and corporate laddernumber 329." He sighed. "Now, thanks to your well-publicized denouncement of the failings of our Plasma Rifle, the corporation decided to demote me. I am an Apology Facilitation Operative Second Class, laddernumber 12,398,219. The mighty has fallen, Miss Next."

"On the contrary," I replied, "you have merely been moved to a level more fitting for your competence. It's a shame. You deserved much worse than this."

His eyes twitched as he grew angry. The old Jack, the homicidal one, returned for a moment. But the feelings were short-lived, and his shoulders fell as he realized that without the Goliath Security Service to back him up, his power over me was minimal.

"Maybe you are right," he said simply. "You will not have to wait your turn, Miss Next. I will deal with your case personally. Is this your son?" He bent down to look closer. "Cute fellow, isn't he?"

"Eiusmod tempor incididunt adipisicing elit," said Friday, glaring at Jack suspiciously.

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'If you touch me, my mum will break your nose.' "

Jack stood up quickly. "I see. Goliath and myself offer a full, frank and unreserved apology."

"What for?"

"I don't know. Have it on account. Would you care to come to my office?"

He beckoned me out the door, and we crossed a courtyard with a large fountain in the middle, past a few suited Goliath officials chattering in a corner, then through another doorway and down a wide corridor full of clerks moving backwards and forwards with folders tucked under their arms.

Jack opened a door, ushered me in, offered me a chair and then sat himself. It was a miserable little office, devoid of any decoration except a shabby Lola Vavoom calendar on the wall and a dead plant in a pot. The only window looked out onto a wall. He arranged some papers on his desk and spoke into the intercom.

"Mr. Higgs, would you bring the Thursday Next file in, please?"

He looked at me earnestly and set his head at a slight angle, as though trying to affect some sort of apologetic demeanor.

"None of us quite realized," he began in the sort of soft voice that undertakers use when attempting to persuade you to buy the deluxe coffin, "just how appalling we had been until we started asking people if they were at all unhappy with our conduct."

"Why don't we cut the cr--" I looked at Friday, who looked back at me. "Cut the . . . cut the . . . *nonsense* and go straight to the place where you atone for your crimes."

He sighed and stared at me for a moment, then said, "Very well. What did we do wrong again?"

"You can't remember?"

"I do lots of wrong things, Miss Next. You'll excuse me if I can't remember details."

"You eradicated my husband," I said through gritted teeth.

"Of course! And what was the name of the eradicatee?"

"Landen," I replied coldly. "Landen Parke-Laine."

At that moment a clerk arrived with a pile of papers and laid them on his desk. Jack opened the file, which was marked "Most Secret," and leafed through them.

"The record shows that at the time you say your husband was eradicated, your case officer was operative Schitt-Hawse. It says here that he pressured you to release operative Schitt--that's me--from within the pages of 'The Raven' by utilizing an unnamed ChronoGuard operative who *volunteered* his services. It says that you complied but our promise was revoked due to an unforeseen and commercially necessary overriding blackmail-continuance situation."

"You mean corporate greed, don't you?"

"Don't underestimate greed, Miss Next--it's commerce's greatest motivating force. In this context it was probably due to our plans to use the BookWorld to dump nuclear waste and sell our extremely high-quality goods and services to characters in fiction. You were then imprisoned in our most inaccessible vault, from where you escaped, methodology unknown."

He closed the file.

"What this means, Miss Next, is that we kidnapped you, tried to kill you, and then had you on our shoot-on-sight list for over a year. You may be in line for a generous cash settlement."

"I don't want cash, Jack. You had someone go back in time to kill Landen. Now you can just get someone to go back again and *unkill* him!"

Jack Schitt paused and drummed his fingers on the table for a moment.

"That's not how it works," replied Schitt testily. "The apology and restitution rules are very clear--for us to repent, we must agree as to what we have done wrong, and there's no mention of any Goliath-led illegal-time-related jiggy-pokery in our report. Since Goliath's records are time-audited on a regular basis, I think that proves conclusively that if there *was* any timefoolery, it was instigated by the ChronoGuard--Goliath's chronological record is above reproach."

I thumped the table with my fist, and Jack jumped. Without his henchmen around him, he was a coward, and every time he flinched, I grew stronger.

"This is complete and utter sh--" I looked at Friday again. "*Rubbish*, Jack. Goliath and the ChronoGuard eradicated my husband. You had the power to remove him--you can be the ones that put him back."

"That's not possible."

*"Give me back my husband!"*

The anger in Jack returned. He also rose and pointed an accusing finger at me. "Have you even the *slightest* idea how much it costs to bribe the ChronoGuard? More money than we care to spend on the sort of miserable, halfhearted forgiveness you can offer us. And another thing, I--Excuse me."

The phone had rung, and he picked it up, his eyes flicking instantly to me as he listened.

"Yes, it is. . . . Yes, she is. . . . Yes, we do. . . . Yes, I will."

His eyes opened wide, and he stood up.

"This is indeed an honor, sir. . . . No, that would not be a problem at all, sir. . . . Yes, I'm sure I can persuade her about that, sir. . . . No, it's what we all want. . . . And a very good day to you, sir. Thank you."

He put down the phone and fetched an empty cardboard box from

the cupboard with a renewed spring in his step.

"Good news!" he exclaimed, taking some junk out of his desk and placing it in the box. "The CEO of New Goliath has taken a special interest in your case and will personally guarantee the return of your husband."

"I thought you said that timefoolery had nothing to do with you?"

"Apparently I was misinformed. We would be very happy to reactualize Libner."

"Landen."

"Right."

"What's the catch?" I asked suspiciously.

"No catch," replied Jack, picking up his desk nameplate and depositing it in the box along with the calendar. "We just want you to forgive us and *like* us."

"Like you?"

"Yes. Or pretend to anyway. Not so very hard, now, is it? Just sign this Standard Forgiveness Release Form at the bottom *here*, and we'll reactualize your hubby. Simple, isn't it?"

I was still suspicious.

"I don't believe you have any intention of getting Landen back."

"All right, then," said Jack, taking some files out of the filing cabinet and dumping them in his cardboard box, "don't sign and you'll never know. As you say, Miss Next--we got rid of him, so we can get him back."

"You stiffed me once before, Jack. How do I know you won't do it again?"

Jack paused in his packing and looked slightly apprehensive.

"Are you going to sign?"

"No."

Jack sighed and started to take things back out of the cardboard box and return them to their places.

"Well," he muttered, "there goes my promotion. But listen, whether you sign or not, you walk out of here a free woman. New Goliath has



no argument with you any longer. Besides, what do you have to lose?"

"All I want," I replied, "is to get my husband back. I'm not signing anything."

Jack took his nameplate out of the cardboard box and put it back on his desk.

The phone rang again.

"Yes, sir. . . . No, she won't, sir. . . . I tried that, sir. . . . Very well, sir."

He put the phone down and picked up his nameplate again and hovered it over his box.

"That was the CEO. He wants to apologize to you personally. Will you go?"

I paused. Seeing the head honcho of Goliath was an almost unprecedented event for a non-Goliath official. If anyone could get Landen back, it was him. "Okay."

Jack smiled, dropped the nameplate in his box and then hurriedly threw everything else back in.

"Well," he said, "must dash--I've just been promoted up three laddernumbers. Go to the main reception desk, and someone will meet you. Don't forget your Standard Forgiveness Release Form, and if you could mention my name, I'd be really grateful."

He handed me my unsigned forms as the door opened and another Goliath operative walked in, also holding a cardboard box full of possessions.

"What if I don't get him back, Mr. Schitt?"

"Well," he said, looking at his watch, "if you have any grievances about the quality of our contrition, you had better take it up with your appointed Goliath apologist. I don't work here anymore."

And he smiled a supercilious smile, put on his hat and was gone.

"Well!" said the new apologist as he walked around the desk and started to arrange his possessions in the new office. "Is there anything you'd like us to apologize for?"

"Your corporation," I muttered.

"Fully, frankly and unreservedly," replied the apologist in the

sincerest of tones.

## Meeting the CEO

Fifty years ago we were only a small multinational with barely 7,000 employees. Today we have over 38 million employees in 14,000 companies dealing in over 12 million different products and services. The size of Goliath is what gives us the stability to be able to say confidently that we will be looking after you for many years to come. By 1980 our turnover was equal to the combined GNP of 72 percent of the planet's nations. This year we see the corporation take the next great leap forward--to fully recognized religion with our own gods, demigods, priests, places of worship and prayerbook. Goliath shares will be exchanged for entry into our new faith-based corporate-management system, where you (the devotees) will worship us (the gods) in exchange for protection from the world's evils and a reward in the afterlife. I know you will join me in this endeavor as you have in all our past endeavors. A full leaflet explaining how you can help further the corporation's interest in this matter will be available shortly. *New Goliath. For all you'll ever need. For all you'll ever want. Ever.*

Extract from the Goliath Corporation CEO's 1988 Conference speech

I walked to the main desk and gave my name to the receptionist, who, raising her eyebrows at my request, called the 110th floor, registered some surprise and then asked me to wait. I pushed Friday towards the waiting area and gave him a banana I had in my bag. I sat and watched the Goliath officials walking briskly backwards and forwards across the polished marble floors, all looking busy but seemingly doing nothing.

"Miss Next?"

There were two individuals standing in front of me. One was dressed in the dark Goliath blue of an executive; the other was a footman in full livery holding a polished silver tray.

"Yes?" I said, standing up.

"My name is Mr. Godfrey, the CEO's personal assistant's assistant. If you would be so kind?" He indicated the tray.

I understood his request, unholstered my automatic and laid it on the salver. The footman paused politely. I got the message and placed my two spare clips on it as well. He bowed and silently withdrew, and the Goliath executive led me silently towards a roped-off elevator at the far end of the concourse. I wheeled Friday in, and the doors hissed shut behind us.

It was a glass elevator that rose on the outside of the building and from our vantage point as we were whisked noiselessly heavenward, I could see all of Goliathopolis's buildings, reaching almost all the way down the coast to Douglas. The size of the corporation's holdings was never more demonstrably immense--all these buildings simply *administered* the thousands of companies and millions of employees around the world. If I had been in a charitable frame of mind, I might have been impressed by the scale and grandeur of Goliath's establishment. As it was, I saw only ill-gotten gains.

The smaller buildings were soon left behind as we continued on upwards, until even the other skyscrapers were dwarfed. I was staring with fascination at the spectacular view when without warning the exterior was suddenly obscured by a white haze. Water droplets formed on the outside of the elevator, and I could see nothing until we burst clear of the cloud and into bright sunshine and a deep blue sky a few seconds later. I stared across the tops of the clouds that stretched away unbroken into the distance. I was so enthralled by the spectacle that I didn't realize the elevator had stopped.

"Ipsum," said Friday, who was also impressed and pointed in case I had missed the view.

"Miss Next?"

I turned. To say the boardroom of the Goliath Corporation was impressive would not be doing it the justice it deserves. It was on the top floor of the building. The walls and roof were all tinted glass and, from where we stood, on a clear day you must be able to look down upon the world with the viewpoint of a god. Today it looked as though we were afloat on a cotton-wool sea. The building and its position, high above the planet both geographically and morally, perfectly reflected the corporation's dominance and power.

In the middle of the room was a long table with perhaps thirty

suited Goliath board members all standing next to their seats, watching me in silence. No one said anything, and I was about to ask who was the boss when I noticed a large man staring out the window with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Ipsum!" said Friday.

"Allow me," began my escort, "to introduce the chief executive officer of the Goliath Corporation, John Henry Goliath V, great-great-grandson of our founder, John Henry Goliath."

The figure staring out the window turned to meet me. He must have been over six foot eight and was large with it. Broad, imposing and dominating. He was not yet fifty and had piercing green eyes that seemed to look straight through me, and he gave me such a warm smile that I was instantly put at my ease.

"Miss Next?" he said in a voice like distant thunder. "I've wanted to meet you for some time."

His handshake was warm and friendly; it was easy to forget just who he was and what he had done.

"They are standing for *you*," he announced, indicating the board members. "You have personally cost us over a billion pounds in cash and at least four times that in lost revenues. Such an adversary is to be admired rather than reviled."

The board members applauded for about ten seconds, then sat back down at their places. I noticed among them Brik Schitt-Hawse, who inclined his head to me in recognition.

"If I didn't already know the answer I would offer you a position on our board," said the CEO with a smile. "We're just finishing a board meeting, Miss Next. In a few minutes, I shall be at your disposal. Please ask Mr. Godfrey if you require any refreshments for you or your son."

"Thank you."

I asked Godfrey for an orange juice in a beaker for Friday and took Friday out of his stroller and sat with him on a nearby armchair to watch the proceedings.

"Item seventy-six," said a small man wearing a Goliath-issue cobalt blue suit, "Antarctica. There has been a degree of opposition to our purchase of the continent by a small minority of do-gooders who believe our use is anything but benevolent."

"And this, Mr. Jarvis, is a problem because . . . ?" demanded John Henry Goliath.

"Not a problem but an *observation*, sir. I propose that, to offset any possible negative publicity, we let it be known that we merely acquired the continent to generate new ecotourism-related jobs in an area traditionally considered a low point in employment opportunities."

"It shall be so," boomed the CEO. "What else?"

"Well, since we will take the role of 'ecocustodians' very seriously, I propose sending a fleet of ten warships to protect the continent against vandals who seek to harm the penguin population, illegally remove ice and snow and create general mischief."

"Warships eat heavily into profit margins," said another member of the board. But Mr. Jarvis had already thought of that. "Not if we subcontract the security issue to a foreign power eager to do business with us. I have formulated a plan whereby the United Caribbean Nations will patrol the continent in exchange for all the ice and snow they want. With the purchase of Antarctica, we can undercut snow exports from all the countries in the Northern Alliance. Their unsold snow will be bought by us at four pence a ton, melted and exchanged for building sand with Morocco. This will be exported to sand-deficient nations at an overall profit of twelve percent. You'll find it all in my report."

There was a murmur of assent around the table. The CEO nodded his head thoughtfully.

"Thank you, Mr. Jarvis, your idea finds favor with the board. But tell me, what about the vast natural resource that we bought Antarctica to exploit in the first place?"

Jarvis snapped his fingers, and the elevator doors opened to reveal a chef who wheeled in a trolley with a silver dinner cover. He stopped next to the CEO's chair, took off the cover and served the CEO a small plate with what looked like sliced pork on it. A footman laid a knife and a fork next to the plate, along with a crisp napkin, then withdrew.

The CEO took a small forkful and put it in his mouth. His eyes opened wide in shock, and he spit it out. The footman passed him a glass of water.

"Disgusting!"

"I agree, sir," replied Jarvis, "almost completely inedible."

"Blast! Do you mean to tell me we've bought an entire continent with a potential food yield of ten million penguin-units per year only to find we can't eat any of them?"

"Only a minor setback, sir. If you would all turn to page 72 of your agenda . . ."

All the board members simultaneously opened their files. Jarvis picked up his report and walked to the window to read it.

"The problem of selling penguins as the Sunday roast of choice can be split into two parts: one, that penguins taste like creosote, and two, that many people have a misguided idea that penguins are somewhat "cute" and "cuddly" and "endangered." To take the first point first, I propose that, as part of the launch of this abundant new foodstuff, there should be a special penguin-cookery show on GoliathChannel 16, as well as a highly amusing advertising campaign with the catchy phrase "P-p-p-prepare a p-p-p-penguin." ' "

The CEO nodded thoughtfully.

"I further suggest," continued Jarvis, "that we finance an independent study into the health-imbuing qualities of seabirds in general. The findings of this independent and wholly impartial study shall be that the recommended weekly intake of penguin per person should be . . . one penguin."

"And point two?" asked another board member. "The public's positive and noneatworthy perception of penguins in general?"

"Not insurmountable, sir. If you recall, we had a similar problem marketing baby-seal burgers, and that is now one of our most popular lines. I suggest we depict penguins as callous and unfeeling creatures who insist on bringing up their children in what is little more than a large chest freezer. Furthermore, the 'endangered' marketing problem can be used to our advantage by an advertising strategy along the lines of 'Eat them quick before they're all gone!' "

"Or," said another board member, " 'Place a penguin in your kitchen--have a snack before extinction.' "

"Doesn't rhyme very well, does it?" said a third. "What about 'For a taste that's a bit more distinct, eat a bird before it's extinct'?"

"I preferred mine."

Jarvis sat down and awaited the CEO's thoughts.

"It shall be so. Why not 'Antarctica--the New Arctic' as a by-line?

Have our people in advertising put a campaign together. The meeting is over."

The board members closed their folders in one single synchronized movement and then filed in an orderly way to the far end of the room, where a curved staircase led downstairs. Within a few minutes, only Brik Schitt-Hawse and the CEO remained. He placed his red-leather briefcase on the desk in front of me and looked at me dispassionately, saying nothing. For someone like Schitt-Hawse who loved the sound of his own voice, it was clear the CEO called every shot.

"What did you think?" asked Goliath.

"Think?" I replied. "How about 'Morally Reprehensible'?"

"I believe that you will find there is no moral good or bad, Miss Next. Morality can be asserted only from the safe retrospection of twenty years or more. Parliaments have far too short a life to do any long-term good. It is up to corporations to do what is best for everyone. The tenure of an administration may be five years--for us it can be several centuries, and none of that tiresome accountability to get in the way. The leap to Goliath as a religion is the next logical step."

"I'm not convinced, Mr. Goliath," I told him. "I thought you were becoming a religion to evade the Seventh Revealment of St. Zvlkx."

He gazed at me with his piercing green eyes. "It's *avoid*, not evade, Miss Next. A trifling textual change but legally with great implications. We can legally attempt to avoid the future but not evade it. As long as we can demonstrate a forty-nine-percent chance that our future-altering attempts might fail, we are legally safe. The ChronoGuard is very strict on the rules and we'd be fools to try and break them."

"You didn't ask me up here to argue legal definitions, Mr. Goliath."

"No, Miss Next. I wanted to have this opportunity to explain ourselves to you, one of our most vociferous opponents. I have doubts, too, and if I can make you understand then I will have convinced myself that what we are doing is right, and good. Have a seat."

I sat, rather too obediently. Mr. Goliath had a strong personality.

"Humans are molded by evolution to be short-termists, Miss Next," he continued. His voice rumbled deeply and seemed to echo inside my head. "We need only to see our children to reproductive age to be successful in a biological sense. We have to move beyond that. If we



see ourselves as residents on this planet for the long term, we need to plan for the long term. Goliath has a thousand-year plan for itself. The responsibility for this planet is far too important to leave to a fragmented group of governments, constantly bickering over borders and only looking towards their own self-interest. We at Goliath see ourselves not as a corporation or a government but as a force for good. A force for good in *waiting*. We have thirty-eight million employees at present; it isn't difficult to see the benefit of having three billion. Imagine everyone on the planet working towards a single goal--the banishment of all governments and the creation of one business whose sole function it is to run the planet *for* the people on the planet, equally and sustainably for all--not Goliath, but *Earth, Inc.* A company with every member of the world holding a single, equal share."

"Is that why you're becoming a religion?"

"Let's just say that your friend Mr. Zvlkx has goaded us into a course of action that is long overdue. You used the word 'religion,' but we see it more as a one, unifying faith to bring all mankind together. One world, one nation, one people, one aim. Surely you can see the sense in that?"

The strange thing was, I began to see that it could work. Without nations there would be no border disputes. The Crimean War alone had lasted for nearly 132 years, and there were at least a hundred smaller conflicts going on around the planet. Suddenly Goliath seemed not so bad after all, and was indeed our friend. I was a fool not to realize it before.

I rubbed my temples.

"So," continued the CEO in a soft rumble, "I'd like to offer an olive branch to you right now and uneradicate your husband."

"In return," added Schitt-Hawse, speaking for the first time, "we would like for you to accept our full, frank and unreserved apology and sign our Standard Forgiveness Release Form."

I looked at them both in turn, then at the contract they had placed in front of me, then at Friday, who had put his fingers in his mouth and was looking up at me with an inquisitive air. I had to get my husband back, and Friday his father. There didn't seem any good reason not to sign.

"I want your word you'll get him back."

"You have it," replied the CEO.

I took the offered pen and signed the form at the bottom.

"Excellent!" muttered the CEO. "We'll reactualize your husband as soon as possible. Good day, Miss Next. It was a very great pleasure to meet you."

"And you," I replied, smiling and shaking both their hands. "I must say I'm very pleased with what I've heard here today. You can count on my support when you become a religion."

They gave me some leaflets on how to join New Goliath, which I eagerly accepted, and I was shown out a few minutes later, the shuttle to Tarbuck Graviport having been held on my account. By the time I had reached Tarbuck, the inane grin had subsided from my face; by the time I had arrived at Saknussum, I was confused; on the drive back to Swindon, I was suspicious that something wasn't quite right; by the time I had reached Mum's home, I was furious. I had been duped by Goliath--again.

## That Evening

### Toast May Be Injurious to Health

That was the shock statement put out by a joint Kaine-Goliath research project undertaken last Tuesday morning. "In our research we have found that in certain circumstances eating toast may make the consumer writhe around in unspeakable agony, foaming at the mouth before death mercifully overcomes them." The scientists went on to report that although these findings were by no means complete, more work needed to be done before toast had a clean bill of health. The Toast Marketing Board reacted angrily and pointed out that the "at risk" slice of toast in the experiment had been spread with the deadly poison strychnine and these "scientific" trials were just another attempt to besmirch the board's good name and that of their sponsee, opposition leader Redmond van de Poste.

Report in *Goliath Today!*, July 17, 1988

"How was your day?" asked Mum, handing me a large cup of tea. Friday had been tuckered out by all the activity and had fallen asleep into his cheesy bean dips. I had bathed him and put him to bed before having something to eat myself. Hamlet and Emma were out at the movies or something, Bismarck was listening to Wagner on his Walkman, so Mum and I had a moment to ourselves.

"Not good," I replied slowly. "I can't dissuade an assassin from trying to kill me; Hamlet isn't safe here, but I can't send him back; and if I don't get Swindon to win the SuperHoop, then the world will end. Goliath somehow duped me into forgiving them, I have my own stalker, and also have to figure out how to get the banned books I *should* be hunting for SO-14 out of the country. And Landen's still not back."

"Really?" she said, not having listened to me at all. "I think I've got a

plan how we can deal with that annoying offspring of Pickwick's."

"Lethal injection?"

"Not funny. No, my friend Mrs. Beatty knows a dodo whisperer who can work wonders with unruly dodos."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"Not at all."

"I'll try anything, I suppose. I can't understand why he's so difficult--Pickers is a real sweetheart."

We fell silent for a moment.

"Mum?" I said at last.

"Yes?"

"What do you think of Herr Bismarck?"

"Otto? Well, most people remember him for his 'blood and iron' rhetoric, unification arguments, and the wars--but few give him credit for devising the first social security system in Europe."

"No, I mean . . . that is to say . . . you wouldn't--"

At that moment we heard some oaths and a slammed door. After a few thumps and bumps, Hamlet burst into the living room, stopped, composed himself, rubbed his forehead, looked heavenwards, sighed deeply and then said:

"O, that this too too solid flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew!"<sup>1</sup>

"Is everything all right?" I asked

"Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd his canon 'gainst self-slaughter!"<sup>2</sup>

"I'll make a cup of tea," said my mother, who had an instinct for these sorts of things. "Would you like a slice of Battenberg, Mr. Hamlet?"

"O God! God! How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable--yes, please--seem to me all the uses of this world!"<sup>3</sup>

She nodded and moved off.

"What's up?" I asked Emma, who had entered with Hamlet, as he strutted around the living room, beating his head in frustration and

grief.

"Well, we went to see *Hamlet* at the Alhambra."

"Crumbs!" I muttered. "It . . . er . . . didn't go down too well, I take it?"

"Well," reflected Emma, as Hamlet continued his histrionics around the living room, "the play was okay apart from Hamlet shouting out a couple of times that Polonius wasn't *meant* to be funny and Laertes wasn't remotely handsome. The management weren't particularly put out--there were at least twelve Hamlets in the audience, and they all had something to say about it."

"Fie on't! Ah, fie!" continued Hamlet. " 'Tis an unweeded garden that grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature possess it merely--!"<sup>4</sup>

"No," continued Emma, "it was when we and the twelve other Hamlets went to have a quiet drink with the play's company afterwards that things turned sour. Piarno Keyes--who was playing Hamlet--took umbrage at Hamlet's criticisms of his performance; Hamlet said his portrayal was far too indecisive. Mr. Keyes said Hamlet was mistaken, that Hamlet was a man racked by uncertainty. Then Hamlet said he *was* Hamlet so should know a thing or two about it; one of the other Hamlets disagreed and said *he* was Hamlet and thought Mr. Keyes was excellent. Several of the Hamlets agreed, and it might have ended there, but Hamlet said that if Mr. Keyes insisted on playing Hamlet, he should look at how Mel Gibson did it and improve his performance in light of that."

"Oh, dear."

"Yes," said Emma. "Oh, dear. Mr. Keyes flew right off the handle. 'Mel Gibson?' he roared. 'Mel \*\*\*\*ing Gibson? That's all I ever \*\*\*\*ing hear these days!' and he then tried to punch Hamlet on the nose. Hamlet was too quick, of course, and had his bodkin at Keyes's throat before you could blink, so one of the other Hamlets suggested a *Hamlet* contest. The rules were simple: they all had to perform the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, and the drinkers in the tavern gave them points out of ten."

"And . . . ?"

"Hamlet came last."

"Last? How could he come last?"

"Well, he insisted on playing the soliloquy less like an existential question over life and death and the possibility of an afterlife, and

more about a postapocalyptic dystopia where crossbow-wielding punks on motorbikes try to kill people for their gasoline."

I looked across at Hamlet who had quieted down a bit and was looking through my mother's video collection for Olivier's *Hamlet* to see if it was better than Gibson's.

"No wonder he's hacked off."

"Here we go!" said my mother, returning with a large tray of tea things. "There's nothing like a nice cup of tea when things look bad!"

"Humph," grunted Hamlet, staring at his feet. "I don't suppose you've got any of that cake, have you?"

"Especially for you!" My mother smiled, producing the Battenberg with a flourish. She was right, too. After a few cups and a slice of cake, Hamlet was almost human again.

I left Emma and Hamlet arguing with my mother over whether they should watch Olivier's *Hamlet* or *Great Croquet Sporting Moments* on the television and went to sort some washing in the kitchen. I stood there trying to figure out just what sort of brain-scrubbing technique Goliath had used on me to get me to sign their Forgiveness Release. Oddly, I was still getting pro-Goliath flashbacks. In absent moments I felt they weren't so bad, then had to consciously remind myself that they were. On the plus side, there was a possibility Landen might be reactualized, but I didn't know when it would be, or how.

I was just getting around to wondering if a cold soak might remove ketchup stains better than a hot wash when there was a light crackling sound in the air, like crumpled cellophane. It grew louder, and green tendrils of electricity started to envelop the Kenwood mixer, then grew stronger until a greenish glow like St. Elmo's fire was dancing around the microwave. There was a bright light and a rumble of thunder as three figures started to materialize into the kitchen. Two of them were dressed in body armor and holding ridiculously large blaster-type weapons; the other figure was tall and dressed in jet black high-collared robes that hung to the floor in one direction and buttoned tightly up to his throat in the other. He had a pale complexion, high cheekbones and a small and very precise goatee. He stood with his arms crossed and was staring at me with one eyebrow raised imperiously. This was truly a tyrant among tyrants, a cruel galactic leader who had murdered billions in his never-ending and inadequately explained quest for total galactic domination. This . . . was Emperor Zhark.

## Emperor Zhark

The eight Emperor Zhark novels were written throughout the seventies by Handley Paige, an author whose previous works included *Spacestation Z-5* and *Revenge of the Thraals*. With Zhark he hit upon a pastiche of everything a bad SF novel should ever be. Weird worlds, tentacled aliens, space travel and square-jawed fighter aces doing battle with a pantomime emperor who lived for no other reason than to cause evil and disharmony in the galaxy. His usual nemesis in the books was Colonel Brandt of the Space Corps assisted by his alien partner, Ashley. There have been two Zhark films starring Buck Stallion, *Zhark the Destroyer* and *Bad Day at Big Rock*, neither of which was any good.

Millon de Floss, *The Books of H. Paige*

"Do you have to do that?" I asked.

"Dowhat?" replied the Emperor.

"Make such a pointlessly dramatic entrance? And what are those two goons doing here?"

"Who said that?" said a muffled voice from inside the opaque helmet of one of his minders. "I can't see a sodding thing in here."

"Who's a goon?" said the other.

"It's a contractual thing," explained the Emperor, ignoring them both. "I've got a new agent who knows how to properly handle a character of my quality. I have to be given a minimum of eighty words' description at least once in any featured book, and at least twice in a book a chapter has to end with my appearance."

"Do you get book-title billing?"

"We gave that one away in exchange for chapter-heading status. If this were a novel, you'd have to start a new chapter as soon as I

appeared."

"Well, it's a good thing we're not," I replied. "If my mother was here, she'd probably have had a heart attack."

"Oh!" replied the Emperor, looking around. "Do *you* live with your mother, too?"

"What's up? Problems at Jurisfiction?"

"Take five, lads," said Zhark to the two guards, who felt around the kitchen until they found a chair and sat down. "Mrs. Tiggy-winkle sent me," he breathed. "She's busy at the Beatrix Potter Characters Annual General Meeting but wanted me to give you an update on what's happening at Jurisfiction."

"Who's that, darling?" called my mother from the living room.

"It's a homicidal maniac intent on galactic domination," I called back.

"That's nice, dear."

I turned back to Zhark. "So what's the news?"

"Max de Winter from *Rebecca*," said Zhark thoughtfully. "The BookWorld Justice Department has rearrested him."

"I thought Snell got him off the murder charge."

"He did. The department is still gunning for him, though. They've arrested him on--get this--*insurance fraud*. Remember the boat he sank with his wife in it?"

I nodded.

"Well, apparently he claimed the boat on insurance, so they think they might be able to get him on that."

It was not an untypical turn of events in the BookWorld. Our mandate from the Council of Genres was to keep fictional narrative as stable as possible. As long as it was how the author intended, murderers walked free and tyrants stayed in power--that was what we did. Minor infringements that weren't obvious to the reading public, we tended to overlook. However, in a masterstroke of inspired bureaucracy, the Council of Genres also empowered a Justice Department to look into individual transgressions. The conviction of David Copperfield for murdering his first wife was their biggest cause celebre--before my time, I hasten to add--and Jurisfiction, unable to save him, could do little except train another character to take



Copperfield's place. They had tried to get Max de Winter before, but we had always managed to outmaneuver them. Insurance fraud. I could scarcely believe it.

"Have you alerted the Gryphon?"

"He's working on Fagin's umpteenth appeal."

"Get him on it. We can't leave this to amateurs. What about Hamlet? Can I send him back?"

"Not . . . as such," replied Zhark hesitantly.

"He's becoming something of a nuisance," I admitted, "and Danes are liable to be arrested. I can't keep him amused by watching Mel Gibson's films forever."

"I'd like Mel Gibson to play me," said Zhark thoughtfully.

"I don't think Gibson does bad guys," I conceded. "You'd probably be played by Geoffrey Rush or someone."

"That wouldn't be so bad. Is that cake going begging?"

"Help yourself."

Zhark cut a large slice of Battenberg, took a bite and continued, "Okay, here's the deal: we managed to get the Polonius family to attend arbitration over their unauthorized rewriting of *Hamlet*."

"How did you achieve that?"

"Promised Ophelia her own book. All back to normal--no problem."

"So . . . I can send Hamlet back?"

"Not *quite* yet," replied Zhark, hiding his unease by pretending to find a small piece of fluff on his cape. "You see, Ophelia has now got her knickers in a twist about one of Hamlet's infidelities--someone she thinks is called Henna Appleton. Have you heard anything about this?"

"No. Nothing. Nothing at all. Not a thing. Don't even *know* anyone called Henna Appleton. Why?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. Well, she went completely nuts and threatened to drown herself in the first act rather than the fourth. We think we've got her straightened out. But whilst we were doing this--there was a hostile takeover."

I cursed aloud, and Zhark jumped. Nothing was ever

straightforward in the BookWorld. Book mergers, where one book joined another to increase the collective narrative advantage of their own mundane plotlines, were thankfully rare but not unheard of. The most famous merger in Shakespeare was the conjoinment of the two plays *Daughters of Lear* and *Sons of Gloucester* into *King Lear*. Other potential mergers, such as *Much Ado About Verona* and *A Midsummer Night's Shrew*, were denied at the planning stage and hadn't taken place. It could take months to extricate the plots, if it could be done at all. *King Lear* resisted unraveling so strongly we just let it stand.

"So who merged with *Hamlet*?"

"Well, it's now called *The Merry Wives of Elsinore*, and features Gertrude being chased around the castle by Falstaff while being outwitted by Mistress Page, Ford and Ophelia. Laertes is the king of the fairies, and Hamlet is relegated to a sixteen-line subplot where he is convinced Doctor Caius and Fenton have conspired to kill his father for seven hundred pounds."

I groaned. "What's it like?"

"It takes a long time to get funny, and when it finally does, everyone dies."

"Okay," I conceded, "I'll try to keep Hamlet amused. How long do you need to unravel the play?"

Zhark winced and sucked in air through his teeth in the same manner heating engineers do when quoting on a new boiler. "Well, that's the problem, Thursday. I'm not sure that we can do it all. If this happened anywhere but in the original, we could have just deleted it. You know the trouble we had with *King Lear*? Well, I don't see that we're going to have any better luck with *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*."

I sat down and put my head in my hands. No *Hamlet*. The loss was almost too vast to comprehend.

"How long have we got before *Hamlet* starts to change?" I asked without looking up.

"About five days, six at the outside," replied Zhark quietly. "After that, the breakdown will accelerate. In two weeks' time, the play as we know it will have ceased to exist."

"There must be *something* we can do."

"We've tried pretty much everything. We're stuffed--unless you've got a spare William Shakespeare up your sleeve."

I sat up. "What?"

"We're stuffed?"

"After that."

"A spare William Shakespeare up your sleeve?"

"Yes. How will that help?"

"Well," said Zhark thoughtfully, "since no original manuscripts of either *Hamlet* or *Wives* exist, a freshly penned script by the author would thus become the original manuscript--and we could use *those* to reboot the Storycode Engines from scratch. It's quite simple, really."

I smiled but Zhark looked at me with bewilderment. "Thursday, Shakespeare died in 1616!"

I stood up and patted him on the arm. "You get back to the office and make sure things don't get any worse. Leave the Shakespeare up to me. Now, has anyone figured out yet which book Yorrick Kaine is from?"

"We've got all available resources working on it," replied Zhark, still a bit confused, "but there are a lot of novels to go through. Can you give us any pointers?"

"Well, he's not very multidimensional, so I shouldn't go looking into anything too literary. I'd start at political thrillers and work your way towards spy."

Zhark made a note.

"Good. Any other problems?"

"Yes," replied the Emperor. "Simpkin is being a bit of a pest in *The Tailor of Gloucester*. Apparently the tailor let all his mice escape, and now Simpkin won't let him have the cherry-colored twist. If the Mayor's coat isn't ready for Christmas, there'll be hell to pay."

"Get the mice to make the waistcoat. They're not doing anything."

"Okay," he sighed, "I'll give it a whirl." He looked at his watch. "Well, better be off. I've got to annihilate the planet Thraal at four, and I'm already late. Do you think I should use my trusty Zharkian death-ray and fry them alive in a millisecond or nudge an asteroid into their orbit, thus unleashing at least six chapters of drama as they try to find an ingenious solution to defeat me?"

"The asteroid sounds a good bet."

"I thought so, too. Well, see you later."

I waved good-bye as he and his two guards were beamed out of my world and back into theirs, which was certainly the best place for them. We had quite enough tyrants in the real world as it was.

I was just wondering what *The Merry Wives of Elsinore* might be like when there was another buzzing noise and the kitchen was filled with light once more. There, imperious stare, high collar, etc., etc., was Emperor Zhark.

## Emperor Zhark Again

### President George Formby Opens Motorcycle Factory

The President opened the new Brough-Vincent-Norton Motorcycle factory yesterday in Liverpool, bringing much-welcomed jobs to the area. The highly modernized factory, which aims to produce up to a thousand quality touring and racing machines every week, was described by the President as "Cracking stuff!" The President, a longtime advocate of motorcycling, rode one of the company's new Vincent "Super Shadow" racers around the test track, reportedly hitting over 120 MPH, much to his retinue's obvious concern for the octogenarian Formby's health. Our George then gave a cheerful rendering of "Riding in the TT Races," reminding his audience of the time he won the Manx Tourist Trophy on a prototype Rainbow motorcycle.

Article in *The Toad*, July 9, 1988

Forget something?" I asked.

"Yes. What was that cake of your mother's?" "Yes. What was that cake of your mother's?"

"It's called Battenberg."

He got a pen and made a note on his cuff. "Right. Well, that's it, then."

"Good."

"Right."

"Is there something else?"

"Yes."

"And . . . ?"

"It's . . . it's . . ."

"What?"

Emperor Zhark bit his lip, looked around nervously and drew closer. Although I'd had good reason for reprimanding him in the past--and even suspended his Jurisdiction badge for "gross incompetence" on two occasions--I actually liked him a great deal. Within the amnesty of his own books, he was a sadistic monster who murdered millions with staggering ruthlessness, but out here he had his own fair share of worries, demons and peculiar habits--many of which seemed to have stemmed from the strict upbringing undertaken by his mother, the Empress Zharkeena.

"Well," he said, unsure of quite how to put it, "you know the sixth in the Emperor Zhark series is being written as we speak?"

"*Zhark: End of Empire*? Yes, I'd heard that. What's the problem?"

"Well, I've just read the advanced plotline, and it seems that I'm going to be vanquished by the Galactic Freedom Alliance."

"I'm sorry, Emperor, I'm not sure I see your point--are you concerned about losing your empire?"

He moved closer. "If the story calls for it, I guess not. But it's what happens to me at the end that I have a few problems with. I don't mind being cast adrift in space on the imperial yacht or left marooned on an empty planet, but my writer has planned . . . *a public execution*."

He stared at me, shocked by the enormity of it all.

"If that's what he has planned--"

"Thursday, you don't understand. I'm going to be killed off--*written out*! I'm not sure I can take that kind of rejection."

"Emperor," I said, "if a character has run its course, then it's run its course. What do you want me to do? Go and talk the author out of it?"

"Would you?" replied Zhark, opening his eyes wide. "Would you really do that?"

"No. You can't have characters trying to tell their authors what to write in their books. Besides, within your books you are truly evil and need to be punished."

Zhark pulled himself up to his full height. "I see," he said at length. "Well, I might decide to take *drastic* action if you don't at least *attempt* to persuade Mr. Paige. And besides, I'm not *really* evil--I'm just written

that way."

"If I hear any more of this nonsense," I replied, beginning to get annoyed, "I will have you placed under book arrest and charged with incitement to mutiny for what you've just told me."

"Oh, crumbs," he said, suddenly deflated. "You can, can't you?"

"I can. I won't because I can't be bothered, but if I hear anything more about this, I will take steps--do you understand?"

"Yes," replied Zhark meekly and, without another word, vanished.

## Cloned Will Hunting

### Opposition Leader Mildly Criticizes Kaine

Opposition leader Mr. Redmond van de Poste lightly attacked Yorrick Kaine's government yesterday over the possible failure to adequately address the nation's economic woes. Mr. van de Poste suggested that the Danish were "no more guilty of attacking this country than the Swedes" and then went on to question Kaine's independence due to his close sponsorship ties with the Goliath Corporation. In reply Chancellor Kaine thanked van de Poste for alerting him to the Swedes, who were "doubtless up to something," and pointed out that Mr. van de Poste himself was sponsored by the Toast Marketing Board.

Article in *The Gadfly*, July 17, 1988

Sunday was meant to be a day off but it didn't really seem like it. I played golf with Braxton in the morning and outside work he was as amiable a gent as I could possibly hope to meet. He delighted in showing me the rudiments of golf and once or twice I hit the ball quite well--when it made the *thwack* noise and flew away as straight as a die I suddenly realized what all the fuss was about. It wasn't all fun and games, though--Braxton had been leaned on by Flanker who, I assume, had been leaned on by somebody else higher up. In between putting practice and attempting to get my ball out of the bunker, Braxton confided that he couldn't hold off Flanker forever with his empty promise of a report on my alleged Welsh cheese activities, and if I knew what was good for me I would have to at least *try* and look for banned books with SO-14. I promised I would and then joined him for a drink at the nineteenth hole where we were regaled with stories by a large man with a red nose who was, apparently, the Oldest Member.

I was awakened Monday morning by a burbling noise from Friday.



He was standing up in his cot and trying to grasp the curtain, which was out of his reach. He said that now that I was awake I could do a lot worse than take him downstairs, where he could play whilst I made some breakfast. Well, he didn't use those *precise* words, of course--he said something more along the lines of, "Reprehenderit in voluptate velit id est mollit," but I knew what he meant.

I couldn't think of any good reason not to, so I pulled on my dressing gown and took the little fellow downstairs, pondering on quite who, if anyone, was going to look after him today. After I nearly got into a fight with Jack Schitt in front of Friday, I wasn't sure he should witness all that his mum got up to.

My own mother was already up.

"Good morning, Mother," I said cheerfully, "and how are you today?"

"I'm afraid not during the morning," she said, divining my unasked question instantly, "but I can probably manage from teatime onwards."

"I'd appreciate it," I replied, looking at *The Mole* as I put on the porridge. Kaine had given an ultimatum to the Danish: either the government in Denmark ended all its efforts to destabilize England and undermine our economy, or England would have no choice but to recall our ambassador. The Danish had replied that they didn't know what Kaine was talking about and demanded that the trade ban on Danish goods be lifted. Kaine responded angrily, made all sorts of counterclaims, put a 200 percent tariff on Danish bacon imports and closed all avenues of communication.

"Duis aute irure dolor est!" yelled Friday.

"Keep your hair on," I replied, "it's coming."

"Plink!" said Alan angrily, gesturing towards his supper dish indignantly.

"Wait your turn," I told him.

"Plink, *PLINK!*" he replied in a threatening tone, taking a step closer and opening his beak threateningly.

"Try to bite me," I told him, "and you'll be finding a new owner from the front window of Pete & Dave's!"

Alan figured out this was a threat and closed his beak. Pete & Dave's was the local reengineered-pet store, and I was serious. He'd already tried to bite my mother, and even the local dogs were giving him a

wide berth.

At that moment Joffy opened the back door and walked in. But he wasn't alone. He was with something that I can only describe as an untidy bag of thin bones covered in dirty skin and a rough blanket.

"Ah!" said Joffy. "Mum and Sis. Just the ticket. This is St. Zvlkx. Your Grace, this is my mother, Mrs. Next, and my sister, Thursday."

St. Zvlkx looked at me suspiciously from behind a heavy curtain of oily black hair.

"Welcome to Swindon, Mr. Zvlkx," said my mother, curtsying politely. "Would you like some breakfast?"

"He only speaks Old English," put in Joffy. "Here, let me translate."

"Oi, pigface--are you going to eat or what?"

"Ahh!" said the monk, and sat down at the table. Friday stared at him a little dubiously, then started to jabber Lorem Ipsum at him while the monk stared at *him* dubiously.

"How's it all going?" I asked.

"Pretty good," replied Joffy, pouring some coffee for himself and St. Zvlkx. "He's shooting a commercial this morning for the Toast Marketing Board and will be on *The Adrian Lush Show* at four. He's also guest speaker at the Swindon Dermatologists' Convention at the Finis; apparently some of his skin complaints are unknown to science. I thought I'd bring him around to see you--he's full of wisdom, you know."

"It's barely eight in the morning!" said Mum.

"St. Zvlkx rises with the dawn as a penance," Joffy explained. "He spent all of Sunday pushing a peanut around the Brunel Centre with his nose."

"I spent it playing golf with Braxton Hicks."

"How did you do?"

"Okay, I think. My croquet-playing skills stopped me making a complete arse of myself. Did you know that Braxton had six kids?"

"Well, how about some wisdom, then?" asked my mother brightly. "I'm very big on thirteenth-century sagacity."

"Okay," said Joffy. "Oi! Make yourself useful and giue us some wisdom, you old fart."

"Poke it up your arse."

"What did he say?"

"Er . . . he said he would meditate upon it."

"Well," said my mother, who was nothing if not hospitable and could just about make breakfast without consulting the recipe book, "since you are our guest, Mr. Zvlkx, what would you like for breakfast?"

St. Zvlkx stared at her.

"Eat," repeated my mother, making biting gestures. This seemed to do the trick.

"Your mother has firm breasts for a middle-aged woman, orblike and defying grauity. I should like to play with them, as a baker plays with dough."

"What did he say?"

"He says he'd be very grateful for bacon and eggs," replied Joffy quickly, turning to St. Zvlkx and saying, "Any more crap out of you, sunshine, and I'll lock you in the cellar tomorrow night as well."

"What did you say to him?"

"I thanked him for his attendance in your home."

"Ah."

Mum put the big frying pan on the cooker and broke some eggs into it, followed by large rashers of bacon. Pretty soon the smell of bacon pervaded the house, something that attracted not only a sleepwalking DH-82 but also Hamlet and Lady Hamilton, who had given up pretending they weren't sleeping together.

"Hubba hubba," said St. Zvlkx as soon as Emma entered. "Who's the bunny with the scrummy hooters?"

"He wishes you . . . um . . . both good morrow," said Joffy, visibly shaken. "St. Zulkx, this is Lady Hamilton and Hamlet, Prince of Denmark."

"If you're giuing away one of those puppies," continued St. Zvlkx, staring at Emma's cleavage, "I'll haue the one with the brown nose."

"Good morning," said Hamlet without smiling. **"Any more bad language against the good Lady Hamilton and I'll take you outside and make your quietus with a bare bodkin."**

"What did the Prince say?" asked St. Zvlkx.

"Yes," said Joffy, "what did he say?"

"It's **Courier Bold**," I told him, "the traditional language of the BookWorld. He said that he would be failing in his duty as a gentleman if he allowed Zvlkx to show any disrespect to Lady Hamilton."

"What did your sister say?" asked St. Zvlkx.

"She said that if you insult Hamlet's bird again, your nose will be two foot wide across your face."

"Oh."

"Well," said my mother, "this is turning out to be a *very* pleasant morning!"

"In that case," asked Joffy, sensing that the time was just right, "could St. Zvlkx stay here until midday? I've got to give a sermon to the Sisters of Eternal Punctuality at ten, and if I'm late, they throw their prayer books at me."

"No can do, oh, son-my-son," said my mother, flipping the bacon. "Why not take St. Zvlkx with you? I'm sure the nuns will be impressed by his piety."

"Did someone mention nuns?" asked St. Zvlkx, looking around eagerly.

"How you got to be a saint I have no idea," chided Joffy. "Another peep out of you and I'll personally kick your uulgar arse all the way back to the thirteenth century."

St. Zvlkx shrugged, wolfed down his bacon and eggs with his hands and then burped loudly. Friday did the same and collapsed into a fit of giggles.

They all left soon after. Joffy wouldn't mind Friday, and Zvlkx certainly couldn't, so there was nothing for it. As soon as Mum had found her hat, coat and keys and gone out, I rushed upstairs, dressed, then read myself into *Bradshaw Defies the Kaiser* to ask Melanie if she would look after Friday until teatime. Mum said she would be out the whole day, and since Hamlet already knew that Melanie was a gorilla and neither Emma nor Bismarck could *exactly* complain since they were long-dead historical figures themselves, I thought it a safe bet. It

was against regulations, but with Hamlet and the world facing an uncertain future, I was past caring.

Melanie happily agreed, and once she had changed into a yellow polka-dot dress, I brought her out of the BookWorld to my mother's front room, which she thought very smart, especially the festoon curtains. She was pulling the cord to watch the curtains rise and fall when Emma walked in.

"Lady Hamilton," I announced, "this is Melanie Bradshaw." Mel put out a large hand, and Emma shook it nervously, as though expecting Melanie to bite her or something.

"How . . . how do you do?" she stammered. "I've never been introduced to a monkey before."

"Ape," corrected Melanie helpfully. "Monkeys generally have tails, are truly arboreal and belong to the families Hylobatidae, Cebidae and Ceropithecidae. You and I and all the great apes are Pongidae. I'm a gorilla. Well, *strictly* speaking, I'm a mountain gorilla--*Gorilla gorilla beringei*--which lives on the slopes of the Virunga volcanoes--we used to call it British East Africa, but I'm not sure what it is now. Have you ever been there?"

"No."

"Charming place. That's where Trafford--my husband--and I met. He was with his gun bearers hacking his way through the undergrowth during the backstory to *Bradshaw Hunts Big Game* (Collins, 1878, 4/6, illustrated), and he slipped from the path and fell twenty feet into the ravine below, where I was taking a bath."

She picked up Friday in her massive arms, and he chortled with delight.

"Well, I was most *dreadfully* embarrassed. I mean, I was sitting there in the running water without a stitch on, but--and I'll always remember this--Trafford politely apologized and turned his back so I could nip into the bushes and get dressed. I came out to ask him if he might want directions back to civilization--Africa was quite unexplored then, you know--and we got to chatting. Well, one thing led to another, and before I knew it, he had asked me out to dinner. We've been together ever since. Does that sound silly to you?"

Emma thought about how her relationship with Admiral Lord Nelson was lampooned mercilessly in the press. "No, I think that sounds really quite romantic."

"Right," I said, clapping my hands, "I'll be back at three. Don't go out, and if anyone calls, get Hamlet or Emma to answer the door. Okay?"

"Certainly," replied Melanie. "Don't go out, don't answer the door. Simple."

"And no swinging on the curtains or lamp fixtures--they won't stand it."

"Are you saying I'm a bit large?"

"Not at all," I replied hastily. "Things are just *different* in the real world. There is lots of fruit in the bowl and fresh bananas in the refrigerator. Okay?"

"No problemo. Have a nice day."

I drove into town and, avoiding several newspapermen who were still eager to interview me, entered the SpecOps Building, which I noted had been freshly repainted since my last visit. It looked a bit more cheery in mauve, but not much.

"Agent Next?" said a young and extremely keen SO-14 agent in a well-starched black outfit, complete with Kevlar vest, combat boots, and highly visible weaponry.

"Yes?"

He saluted.

"My name is Major Drabb, SO-14. I understand you have been assigned to us to track down more of this pernicious Danish literature."

He was so keen to fulfill his duties I felt chilled. To his credit he would be as enthusiastic helping flood victims; he was just following orders unquestioningly. Worse acts than destroying Danish literature had been perpetrated by men like this. Luckily, I was prepared.

"Good to see you, Major. I had a tip-off that this address might hold a few copies of the banned books."

I passed him a scrap of paper and he read it eagerly.

"The Albert Schweitzer Memorial Library? We'll be on it right away."

And he saluted smartly once again, turned on his heel and was

gone.

I made my way up to the LiteraTec office and found Bowden in the process of packing Karen Blixen's various collections of stories into a cardboard box.

"Hi!" he said, tying up the box with string. "How are things with you?"

"Pretty good. I'm back at work."

Bowden smiled, put down the scissors and string and shook my hand.

"That's very good news indeed! Heard the latest? Daphne Farquitt has been added to the list of banned Danish writers."

"But . . . Farquitt isn't Danish!"

"Her father's name was Farquittsen, so it's Danish enough for Kaine and his idiots."

It was an interesting development. Farquitt's books were pretty dreadful but burning was still a step too far. Just.

"Have you found a way to get all these banned books out of England?" asked Bowden, running some tape across a box of *Out of Africas*. "With Farquitt's books and all the rest of the stuff that's coming in, I think we'll need closer to ten trucks."

"It's certainly on my mind," I replied, having not done anything about it at all.

"Excellent! We'd like to take a convoy through as soon as you say the word. Now, what do you want me to brief you on first? The latest Capulet v. Montague drive-by shooting or which authors are next up for a random dope test?"

"Neither," I replied. "Tell me *everything* you know about cloned Shakespeares."

"We've had to put that on low priority. It's intriguing to be sure, but ultimately pointless from a law-and-order point of view--anyone involved in their sequencing will be too dead or too old to go to trial."

"It's more of a BookWorld thing," I replied, "but important, I promise."

"Well, in *that* case," began Bowden, who knew me too well to think I'd waste his time or my own, "we have three Shakespeares on the slab

at the moment, all aged between fifty and sixty--put those Hans Christian Andersen books in that box, would you? If they *were* cloned, it was way back in the poorly regulated days of the thirties, when there was all sorts of nonsense going on, when people thought they could engineer Olympic runners with four legs, swimmers with real fins, that sort of thing. I've had a brief trawl through the records. The first confirmed WillClone surfaced in 1952 with the accidental shooting of a Mr. 'Shakstpear' in Ten-bury Wells. Then there's the unexplained death of a Mr. 'Shaxzpar' in 1958, Mr. 'Shagxtspar' in 1962 and a Mr. 'Shogtspore' in 1969. There are others, too--"

"Any theories why?"

"I think," said Bowden slowly, "that perhaps someone was trying to synthesize the great man so they could have him write some more great plays. Illegal and morally reprehensible, of course, but potentially of huge benefit to Shakespearean scholars everywhere. The lack of any *young* Shakespeares turning up makes me think this was an experiment long since abandoned."

There was a pause as I mulled this over. Genetic cloning of entire humans was *strictly* forbidden--no commercial bioengineering company would dare try it, and yet no one but a large bioengineering company would have the facilities to undertake it. But if these Shakespeare clones had survived, chances are there were more. And with the real one long dead, his reengineered other self was the only way we could unravel *The Merry Wives of Elsinore*.

"Doesn't this come under the jurisdiction of SO-13?" I said at last.

"Officially, yes," conceded Bowden, "but SO-13 is as underfunded as we are, and Agent Stiggins is far too busy dealing with mammoth migrations and chimeras to have anything to do with cloned Elizabethan playwrights."

Stiggins was the neanderthal head of the cloning police. Legally reengineered by Goliath, he was the ideal person to run SO-13.

"Have you spoken to him?" I asked.

"He's a neanderthal," Bowden replied. "They don't talk at all unless it's absolutely necessary. I've tried a couple of times, but he just stares at me in a funny way and eats live beetles from a paper bag--yuck."

"He'll talk to me," I said. He would, too. I still owed him a favor for when he got me out of a jam with Flanker. "Let's see if he's about."

I picked up the phone, consulted the internal directory and dialed a



number.

I watched as Bowden boxed up more banned books. If he was caught, he'd be finished. The irony of a LiteraTec's being jailed for protecting Farquitt's *Canon of Love*. I liked him all the more for it. No one in the Literary Detectives would knowingly harm a book. We'd all resign before torching a single copy of anything.

"Right," I said, replacing the phone. "His office said there was a chimera alert in the Brunel Centre--we should be able to find him there."

"Whereabouts in the Brunel Centre?"

"If it's a chimera alert, we just follow the screams."

## Chimeras and Neanderthals

*The neanderthal experiment* was conceived in order to create the euphemistically entitled "medical test vessels," living creatures that were as close as possible to humans without actually *being* human within the context of the law. The experiment was an unparalleled success--and failure. The neanderthal was everything that could be hoped for. A close cousin, but not human, physiologically almost identical--and legally with fewer rights than a dormouse. But, sadly for Goliath, even the hardest of medical technicians balked at experiments conducted upon intelligent and speaking entities, so the first batch of neanderthals were trained instead as "expendable combat units," a project that was shelved as soon as the lack of aggressive instincts in the neanderthal was noted. They were subsequently released into the community as cheap labor and became a celebrated tax write-off. It was *Homo sapien* at his least sapient.

Gerhard von Squid, *Neanderthals--Back After a Short Absence*

The Brunel Centre was packed, as usual. Busy shoppers moved from chain store to chain store, trying to find bargains in places whose identical goods were price-fixed by the head office several months in advance. It didn't stop them trying, though.

"So why the interest in photocopied bards?" asked Bowden as we crossed the canal.

"We've got a crisis in the BookWorld."

I outlined what was happening within the play formerly known as *Hamlet*, and he opened his eyes wide.

"Whoa!" he said after a pause. "And I thought *our* work was unusual!"

We didn't have to wait long to find Mr. Stiggins. Within a few

moments, there was a bloodcurdling cry of terror from a startled shopper. A second scream followed, and all of a sudden there was a mad rush of people moving away from the junction of Canal Walk and Bridge Street. We moved against the flow, stepping over discarded shopping and the odd shoe. The cause of the panic was soon evident. Rifling through a rubbish bin for a tasty snack was a bizarre hybrid of a creature--in SO-13 slang a chimera. The genetic revolution that gave us unlimited replacement organs and the power to create dodos and other extinctees from home cloning kits had a downside: perverse pastiches of animals who were borne not on the shoulders of evolution but by hobby gene splicers who didn't know any better than to try to play God in the comfort of their own potting sheds.

As the crowds rapidly departed, Bowden and I stared at the strange creature that lurched and slavered as it rooted through the waste bin. It was about the size of a goat and had the rear legs of one, but not much else. The tail and the forelegs were lizard, the head almost feline. It had several tentacles, and it sucked noisily on a chip-soaked newspaper, the saliva from its toothless mouth dribbling copiously onto the pavement. In general, hybrid birds were the most common product of illegal gene splicing, as birds were closely enough related to one another to come out pretty well no matter how ham-fisted the amateur splicer. You could even create a passable dogfoxfowl or a domestic catleopard with no greater knowledge than a biology O level. No, it was the cross-class abominations that had led to the total ban on home cloning, the lizard-mammal switcheroos that really pushed the limits on what was socially acceptable. It didn't stop the sport, just pushed it underground.

The creature rummaged with its one good arm in the bin, found the remains of a SmileyBurger, stared at it with its five eyes, then pushed it into its mouth. It then flopped to the ground and moved, half shuffling and half slithering to the next bin, all the while hissing like a cat and slapping its tentacles together.

"Oh, my God," said Bowden, "it's got a human arm!"

And so it had. It was when there were bits of recognizable human in them that chimeras were most repellant--a failed attempt to replace a deceased loved one, or hobby gene splicers trying to make themselves a son.

"Repulsive?" said a voice close at hand. "The creature . . . or the creator?" I turned to find myself looking at a squat, beetle-browed neanderthal in a pale suit with a homburg hat perched high on his domed head. I had met him several times before. This was

Bartholomew Stiggins, head of SO-13 here in Wessex.

"Both," I replied.

Stiggins nodded imperceptibly as a blue SO-13 Land Rover pulled up with a squealing of brakes. A uniformed officer jumped out and started to try to push us back.

Stiggins said, "We are together."

The neanderthal took a few steps forward, and we joined him at the creature, which was close enough to touch.

"Reptile, goat, cat, human," murmured the neanderthal, crouching down and staring intently at the creature as it ran a thin, pink, forked tongue across a crisps packet.

"The eyes look insectoid," observed the SO-13 agent, dart gun in the crook of his arm.

"Too big. More like the eyes we found on the chimera up at the bandstand. You remember, the one that looked like a giant hamster?"

"Same splicer?"

The neanderthal shrugged. "Same eyes. You know how they like to trade."

"We'll take a sample and compare. Might lead us to them. That looks like a human arm, doesn't it?"

The creature's arm was red and mottled and no bigger than a child's. To grasp anything, the fingers grabbed and twisted randomly until they found something and then clung on tight.



*The cause of the panic was soon evident. Rifling through a rubbish bin for a tasty snack was a bizarre hybrid of a creature--in SO-13 slang a chimera.*

"Gives it an age," said Stiggins. "Perhaps five years."

"Do you want to take it alive, sir?" asked the SO-13 agent, breaking

the barrel of his gun and pausing. The neanderthal shook his head.

"No. Send him home."

The agent inserted a dart and snapped the breech shut. He took careful aim and fired it into the creature. The chimera didn't flinch--a fully functioning nervous system is a complicated piece of design and well beyond the capabilities of even the most gifted of amateur splicers--but it stopped trying to chew the bark off a tree and twitched several times before lying down and breathing more slowly. The neanderthal moved closer and held the creature's grubby hand as its life ebbed away.

"Sometimes," said the neanderthal softly, "sometimes the innocent must suffer."

"*Dennis!*" came a panicked voice from the gathering crowd, who had fallen silent as the creature's breathing grew slower. "Dennis, Daddy's worried! Where are you?"

The whole sad, sorry scene had just got a lot worse. A man with a beard and in a sleeveless white shirt had run into the empty circle around the rapidly dying creature and stared at us with a look of numb horror on his face.

"Dennis?"

He dropped to his knees next to his creation, which was now breathing in short gasps. The man opened his mouth and made such a wail of heartbroken grief that it made me feel quite odd inside. Such an outpouring cannot be feigned; it comes from the soul, one's very being.

"You didn't have to kill him!" he wailed, wrapping his arms around the dying beast. "*You didn't have to kill him . . . !*"

The uniformed agent moved to pull Dennis's creator away, but the neanderthal stopped him. "No," he said gravely. "Leave him for a moment."

The agent shrugged and walked to the Land Rover to fetch a body bag.

"Every time we do this, it's like killing one of our own," said Stiggins softly. "Where have you been, Miss Next? In prison?"

"Why does everyone think I've been in prison?"

"Because you were heading towards either death or prison when we

last met--and you are not dead."

Dennis's maker was rocking backwards and forwards, bemoaning the loss of his creation.

The agent returned with a body bag and a female colleague, who gently pried the man from the creature and told his unhearing ears his rights.

"Only one signature on a piece of paper keeps neanderthals from being destroyed, the same as him," said Stiggins, indicating the creature. "We can be added to the list of banned creatures and designated a chimera without even an act of parliament."

We turned from the scene as the other two agents laid out the body bag and then rolled the corpse of the chimera onto it.

"You remember Bowden Cable?" I asked. "My partner at the LiteraTecs."

"Of course," replied Stiggins, "we met at your reception."

"How have you been?" asked Bowden.

Stiggins stared back at him. It was a pointless human pleasantry that neanderthals never trouble themselves with.

"We have been fine," replied Stig, forcing the standard answer from his lips. Bowden didn't know it, but he was only rubbing Stiggins's nose deeper in *sapien*-dominated society.

"He means nothing by it," I said matter-of-factly, which is how neanderthals like all their speech. "We need your help, Stig."

"Then we will be happy to give it, Miss Next."

"Mean nothing by *what*?" asked Bowden as we walked across to a bench.

"Tell you later."

Stig sat down and watched as another SO-13 Land Rover turned up, followed by two police cars to disperse the now curious crowd. He pulled out a carefully wrapped package of greaseproof paper and unfolded it to reveal his lunch--two windfall apples, a small bag of live bugs and a chunk of raw meat.

"Bug?"

"No thanks."

"So what can we do for the Literary Detectives?" he asked, attempting to eat a beetle that didn't really want him to and was chased twice around Stig's hand until caught and devoured.

"What do you make of this?" I asked as Bowden handed him a picture of the Shaxtper cadaver.

"It is a dead human," replied Stig. "Are you sure you won't have a beetle? They're very crunchy."

"No thanks. What about this?"

Bowden handed him another picture of one of the other dead clones, and then a third.

"The same dead human from a different viewpoint?"

"They're all different corpses, Stig."

He stopped chewing the uncooked lamb chop and stared at me, then wiped his hands on a large handkerchief and looked more carefully at the photographs. "How many?"

"Eighteen that we know of."

"Cloning entire humans has always been illegal," murmured Stig. "Can we see the real thing?"

The Swindon morgue was a short walk from the SpecOps office. It was an old Victorian building, which in a more enlightened age would have been condemned. It smelt of formaldehyde and damp, and all the morgue technicians looked unhappy and probably had odd hobbies that I would be happier not knowing about.

The lugubrious head pathologist, Mr. Rumplunkett, looked avariciously at Mr. Stiggins. Since killing a neanderthal wasn't technically a crime, no autopsy was ever performed on one--and Mr. Rumplunkett was by nature a curious man. He said nothing, but Stiggins knew precisely what he was thinking.

"We're pretty much the same inside as you, Mr. Rumplunkett. That was, after all, the reason we were brought into being in the first place."

"I'm sorry--" began the embarrassed chief pathologist.

"No, you're *not*," replied Stig. "Your interest is purely professional and in the pursuit of knowledge. We take no offense."



"We're here to look at Mr. Shaxtper," said Bowden.

We were led to the main autopsy room, where several bodies were lying under sheets with tags on their toes.

"Overcrowding," said Mr. Rumplunkett, "but they don't seem to complain too much. This the one?"

He threw back a sheet. The cadaver had a high-domed head, deep-set eyes, a small mustache and goatee. It looked a lot like William Shakespeare from the Droeshout engraving on the title page of the First Folio.

"What do you think?"

"Okay," I said slowly, "he *looks* like Shakespeare, but if Victor wore his hair like that, so would he."

Bowden nodded. It was a fair point.

"And this one wrote the Howdy Doody sonnet?"

"No, that particular sonnet was written by *this* one."

With a flourish, Bowden pulled back the sheet from another cadaver to reveal an identical corpse to the first, only a year or two younger. I stared at them both as Bowden revealed yet another.

"So how many Shakespeares did you say you had?"

"Officially, none. We've got a Shaxtper, a Shakespoor and a Shagsper. Only two of them had any writing on them, all have ink-stained fingers, all are genetically identical, and all died of disease or hypothermia brought on by self-neglect."

"Down-and-outs?"

"Hermits is probably nearer the mark."

"Aside from the fact they all have two left eyes and one size of toe," said Stig, who had been examining the cadavers at length, "they are very good indeed. We haven't seen this sort of craftsmanship for years."

"They're copies of a playwright named William Shakes--"

"We know of Shakespeare, Mr. Cable," interrupted Stig. "We are particularly fond of Caliban from *The Tempest*. This is a deep recovery job. Brought back from a piece of dried skin or a hair in a death mask or something."

"When and where, Stig?"

He thought for a moment.

"They were probably built in the mid-thirties," he announced. "At the time there were perhaps only ten biolabs in the world who could have done this. We think we can safely say we are looking at one of the three biggest genetic-engineering labs in England."

"Not possible," said Bowden. "The manufacturing logs of York, Bognor Regis and Scunthorpe are a matter of public record; it would be inconceivable that a project of this magnitude could have been kept secret."

"And yet they exist," replied Stig, pointing to the corpses and bringing Bowden's argument to a rapid close. "Do you have the genome logs and trace-element spectroscopic evaluations?" he added. "More careful study might reveal something."

"That's not standard autopsy procedure," replied Rumplunkett. "I have my budget to think of."

"If you do a molar cross-section as well, we will donate our body to this department when we die."

"I'll do them for you while you wait," said Mr. Rumplunkett.

Stig turned back to us. "We'll need forty-eight hours to have a look at them. Shall we meet again at my house? We would be honored by your presence." He looked me in the eye and would know if I lied.

"I'd like that very much."

"We, too. Wednesday at midday?"

"I'll be there."

The neanderthal raised his hat, gave a small grunt and moved off.

"Well," said Bowden as soon as Stig was out of earshot, "I hope you like eating beetles and dock leaves."

"You and me both, Bowden--you're coming, too. If he wanted me and me alone, he would have asked me in private. But I'm sure he'll make something more palatable for us."

I frowned as we walked blinking back out into the sunlight. "Bowden?"

"Yup?"

"Did Stig say anything that seemed unusual to you?"

"Not really. Do you want to hear my plans for infil--"

Bowden stopped talking in midsentence as the world ground to a halt. Time had ceased to exist. I was trapped between one moment and the next. It could only be my father.

"Hello, Sweetpea," he said cheerfully, giving me a hug. "How did the SuperHoop turn out?"

"That's next Saturday."

"Oh!" he said, looking at his watch and frowning. "You won't let me down, will you?"

"How will I not let you down? What's the connection between the SuperHoop and Kaine?"

"I can't tell you. Events *must* unfold naturally or there'll be hell to pay. You'll just have to trust me."

"Did you come all this way just to not tell me anything?"

"Not at all. It's a Trafalgar thing. I've been trying all sorts of plans, but Nelson stubbornly resists surviving. I *think* I've figured it out, but I need your help."

"Will this take long?" I asked. "I've got a lot to do, and I have to get home before my mother finds I've left a gorilla in charge of Friday."

"I think I am right in saying," replied my father with a smile, "that this will take no time at all--if you'd prefer, even less!"

## Victory on the *Victory*

### Raunchy Admiral in Love Child Shock

Our sources can reveal exclusively in this paper that Admiral Lord Nelson, the nation's darling and much-decorated war hero, is the father of a daughter with Lady Emma Hamilton, wife of Sir William Hamilton. The affair has been going on for some time, apparently with the full knowledge of both Sir William and Lady Nelson, from whom the hero of the Nile is now estranged. Full story, page two; leader, page three; lurid engravings, pages four, seven, and nine; hypocritical moralistic comment, page ten; bawdy cartoon featuring an overweight Lady Hamilton, pages twelve and fourteen. Also in this issue: reports of the French and Spanish defeat at Cape Trafalgar, page thirty-two, column four.

Article in *The Portsmouth Penny Dreadful*, October 28, 1805

There was a succession of flickering lights, and we were on the deck of a fully rigged battleship that heaved in a long swell as the wind gathered in its sails. The deck was scrubbed for action, and a sense of expectancy hung over the vessel. We were sailing abreast with two other men-of-war, and to landward a column of French ships sailed on a course that would bring us into conflict. Men shouted, the ship creaked, the sails heaved and pennants fluttered in the breeze. We were on board Nelson's flagship, the *Victory*.

I looked around. High on the quarterdeck stood a group of men, uniformed officers in navy blue, with cream breeches and cockaded hats. Amongst them was a smaller man with one arm of his uniform tucked neatly into a jacket festooned with medals and decorations. He couldn't have been a better target if he'd tried.

"It would be hard to miss him," I breathed.

"We keep telling him that, but he's pretty pigheaded about it and

won't budge--just says they are military orders and he does not fear to show them to the enemy. Would you like a jawbreaker?"

He offered me a small paper bag, which I declined. The vessel healed over again, and we watched in silence as the distance between the two ships steadily closed.

"I never get bored of this. See them?"

I followed his gaze to where three people were huddled the other side of a large coil of rope. One was dressed in the uniform of the ChronoGuard, another was holding a clipboard, and the third had what looked like a TV camera on his shoulder.

"Documentary filmmakers from the twenty-second century," explained my father, hailing the other ChronoGuard operative. "Hello, Malcolm, how's it going?"

"Well, thanks!" replied the agent. "Got into the soup a bit when I lost that cameraman at Pompeii. Wanted an extra close-up or something."

"Hard cheese old man, hard cheese. Golf after work?"

"Righto!" replied Malcolm, returning to his charges.

"It's nice being back at work, actually," confessed my father, turning back to me. "Sure you won't have a jawbreaker?"

"No, thanks."

There was a flash and a burst of smoke from the closest French warship. A second later two cannon shots plopped harmlessly into the water. The balls didn't move as fast as I supposed--I could actually see them in flight.

"Now what?" I asked. "Take out the snipers so they can't shoot Nelson?"

"We'd never get them all. No, we must cheat a little. But not yet. Time is of the essence at moments like this."

So we waited patiently on the main deck while the battle heated up. Within minutes seven or eight warships were firing at the *Victory*, the cannonballs tearing into the sails and rigging. One even cut a man in half on the quarterdeck, and another dispatched a small gang of what I took to be marines, who dispersed rapidly. All through this the diminutive admiral, his captain and a small retinue paced the quarterdeck as the smoke from the guns billowed around us, the heat of the muzzle flashes hot on our faces, the concussion almost

deafening. The ship's wheel disintegrated as a shot went through it, and as the battle progressed, we moved about the deck, following the safest path in the light of my father's superior and infinitely precise knowledge of the battle. We moved to one side as a cannonball flew past, moved to another area of the deck as a heavy piece of wood fell from the rigging, then to a third place when some musket balls whizzed past where we had been crouched.

"You know the battle very well!" I shouted above the noise.

"I should do!" he shouted back. "I've been here over sixty times."

The French and British warships drew nearer and nearer until the *Victory* was so close behind the *Bucentaure* that I could see the faces of the staff in the staterooms as we passed. There was a deafening broadside from the guns, and the stern of the ship was torn apart as the British cannonballs ripped through it and down the length of the gun deck. In the lull of the cannon fire as the crews reloaded, I could hear the multilingual cries of injured men. I had seen warfare in the Crimea, but nothing like this. Such close fighting with such devastating weapons reduced men to nothing more than tatters in an instant, the plight of the survivors made worse by the almost certain knowledge that the medical attention they would receive was of the most rudimentary and brutal kind.

I nearly fell over as the *Victory* collided with a French ship just astern of the *Bucentaure*, and as I recovered my balance, I realized just how close the ships were to one another in these sorts of battles. It wasn't a cable's length--they were actually touching. The smoke of the guns made me cough, and the *wheezip* of musket shot close by made me realize that the danger here was very real. There was another deafening concussion as the *Victory's* guns spoke, and the French ship seemed to tremble in the water. My father leaned back to allow a large metal splinter to pass between us, then handed me a pair of binoculars.

"Dad?"

He was reaching into his pocket and pulling out, of all things--a slingshot. He loaded it with a lead ball that was rolling along the deck and pulled the elastic back tight, aiming through the swirling smoke at Nelson.

"See the sharpshooter on the most for'ard platform in the French rigging?"

"Yes?"

"As soon as he puts his finger on the trigger, count two and then say 'fire.' "

I stared up at the French rigging, found the sharpshooter and kept a close eye on him. He was less than fifty feet from Nelson. It was the easiest shot in the world. I saw his finger touch the trigger and--

*"Fire!"*

The lead ball flew from the slingshot and caught Nelson painfully on the knee; he collapsed on the deck while the shot that would have killed him buried itself harmlessly in the deck behind.

Captain Hardy ordered his men to take Nelson below, where he would be detained for the rest of the battle. Hardy would face his wrath come the morning and for disobeying orders would not serve with him again. My father saluted Captain Hardy, and Captain Hardy saluted him back. Hardy had marred his career but saved his admiral. It was a good trade.

"Well," said my father, placing the slingshot back in his pocket, "we all know how this turns out--come on!"

He took my hand as we started to accelerate through time. The battle quickly ended, and the ship's deck was scrubbed clean; day rapidly followed night as we sailed swiftly back to England to a riotous welcome of crowds lining the docks. Then the ship moved again, but this time to Chatham, moldered, lost its rigging, gained it and then moved again--but this time to Portsmouth, whose buildings rose around us as we moved into the twentieth century at breakneck speed.

When we decelerated, we were back in the present time but still in the same position on the deck, by now in dry dock and crowded with schoolchildren holding exercise books and in the process of being led around by a guide.

"And it was at this spot," said the guide, pointing to a plaque on the deck, "that Admiral Nelson was hit on the leg by a ricochet that probably saved his life."

"Well, that's that job taken care of," said Dad, standing up and dusting off his hands. He looked at his watch.

"I've got to go. Thanks for helping out, Sweetpea. Remember: Goliath may try to nobble the Swindon Mallets--especially the team captain--to rig the outcome of the SuperHoop, so be on your toes. Tell Emma--I mean, Lady Hamilton--that I'll pick her up at 0830 her time

tomorrow--and send my love to your mother."

He smiled, there was another rapid flashing of lights, and I was back in the SpecOps Building, walking down the corridor with Bowden who was just finishing the sentence he had begun when Dad arrived.

"--trating the Montagues?"

"Sorry?"

"I said, 'Do you want to hear my plans for infiltrating the Montagues? ' " He wrinkled his nose. "Is that you smelling of cordite?"

"I'm afraid so. Listen, you'll have to excuse me--I think Goliath may try to nobble Roger Kapok, and without him we have even *less* chance of winning the SuperHoop."

He laughed.

"Photocopied bards, Swindon Mallets, eradicated husbands. You like impossible assignments, don't you?"



**Roger Kapok****Contrition Rates Not High Enough to Meet Targets**

That was the shocking report from Mr. Tork Armada, the spokesman for OFGOD, the religious-institution-licensing authority. "Despite continual and concerted efforts by Goliath to meet the levels of repentance demanded by this authority," said Mr. Armada at a press conference yesterday, "they have not managed to reach even halfway to the minimum divinity requirements of this office." Mr. Armada's report was greeted with surprise by Goliath, who had hoped their application would be swift and unopposed. "We are changing tactics to target those to whom Goliath is anathema," said Mr. Brik Schitt-Hawse, a Goliath spokesman. "We have recently secured forgiveness from someone who had despised us deeply, something that counts twentyfold in OFGOD's own contrition-target goals. More like her will soon follow." Mr. Armada was clearly not impressed and simply said, "Well, we'll see."

Report in *Goliath News*, July 17, 1988

I trotted up the road to the thirty-thousand-seat croquet stadium, deep in thought. Goliath's contrition rate had been published that morning, and thanks to me and the Crimean Mass-Apology Project, switching to a religion was now not only possible but probable. The only plus side was that in all likelihood it wouldn't happen until after the SuperHoop, which raised the possibility--confirmed by my father--that Goliath would try and nobble the Swindon team. And getting to the captain, Roger Kapok, was probably the best way to do it.

I passed the VIP car park, where a row of expensive automobiles was on display, and showed my SpecOps pass to the bored security guard. I entered the stadium and walked up one of the public-access tunnels to the terraces and from there looked down upon the green. From this distance the hoops were almost invisible, but their positions

were marked by large white circles painted on the turf. The ten-yard lines crossed the green from side to side, and the "natural hazards"--the Italian Sunken Garden, rhododendron bushes and herbaceous flower beds--stood out from within their positions on the green itself. Each "obstruction" was scrupulously constructed to World Croquet League specifications. The height of the rhododendrons was carefully measured before each game, the herbaceous border stocked with identical shrubs, the sunken garden with its lilies and lead fountain of Minerva was the same on every green the world over, from Dallas to Poona, Nairobi to Reykjavik.

Below me I could see the Swindon Mallets indulging in a tough training session. Roger Kapok was amongst them, barking orders as his team ran backwards and forwards, whirling their mallets dangerously close to one another. Four-ball croquet could be a dangerous sport, and close-quarters stickwork that managed not to involve severe physical injury was considered a skill unique to the Croquet League.

I ran down the steps between the tiered seating, which was nearly my undoing; halfway down I slipped on some carelessly deposited banana skins and if it hadn't have been for some deft footwork I might have plunged headfirst onto the concrete steps. I muttered a curse under my breath, glared at one of the grounds-men and stepped out onto the green.

"So," I heard Kapok say as I drew closer, "we've got the big match on Saturday, and I don't want anyone thinking that we will automatically win just because St. Zvlkx said so. Brother Thomas of York predicted a twenty-point victory for the Battersea Chargers last week, and they were beaten hollow, so stay on your toes. I won't have the team relying on destiny to win this match--we do it on teamwork, application and tactics." There was a grunting and nodding of heads from the assembled team, and Kapok continued. "Swindon has never won a SuperHoop, so I want this to be our first. Biffo, Smudger and Aubrey will lead the offensive as usual, and I don't want anyone tumbling into the sunken garden like at last Tuesday's practice. The hazards are there to lose opponents' balls on a clean and legal roquet, and I don't want them used for any other purpose."

Roger Kapok was a big man with closely cropped hair and a badly broken nose, which he wore with pride. He had taken a croquet ball in the face five years ago, before helmets and body armor were compulsory. At thirty-five he had reached the upper age limit for pro croquet and had been with Swindon for over ten years. He and the rest of the team were local legends and hadn't needed to buy a drink

in Swindon's pubs for as long as anyone could remember--but *outside* Swindon they were barely known at all.

"Thursday Next," I said, walking closer and introducing myself, "SpecOps. Can I have a word?"

"Sure. Take five, guys."

I shook Roger's hand, and we walked off towards the herbaceous border, which was aligned on the forty-yard line, just next to the garden roller, which, due to a horrific accident at the Pan-Pacific Cup last year, was now padded.

"I'm a big fan, Miss Next," said Roger, smiling broadly to reveal several missing teeth. "Your work on *Jane Eyre* was astounding. I love Charlotte Bronte's novels. Don't you think the Ginerva Fanshawe character from *Villette* and Blanche Ingram from *Jane Eyre* are sort of similar?"

I had noticed of course, because they actually *were* the same person, but I didn't think Kapok or anyone else out should know about the economics of the BookWorld.

"Really?" I said. "I'd not noticed. I'll come straight to the point, Mr. Kapok. Has anyone tried to dissuade you from playing this Saturday?"

"No. And you probably just heard me telling the team to ignore the Seventh Revealment. We aim to win for our own sakes and that of Swindon. And we *will* win, you have my word on that!"

He smiled that dazzling reconstructed Roger Kapok smile that I had seen so many times on billboards throughout Swindon, advertising everything from toothpaste to floor paint. His confidence was infectious, and suddenly our chances of beating the Reading Whackers seemed to move from "totally impossible" to "deeply improbable."

"And what about you?" I asked, remembering my father's warning that he would be the first one Goliath would try to nobble.

"What about me?"

"Would you stay with the team no matter what?"

"Of course!" he replied. "Wild horses couldn't drag me away from leading the Mallets to victory."

"Promise?"

"On my honor. The code of the Kapoks is at stake. Only death will keep me off the green on Saturday."

"You should be on your guard, Mr. Kapok," I murmured. "Goliath will try anything to make sure Reading wins the SuperHoop."

"I can look after myself."

"I don't doubt it, but you should be on your guard."

I paused as a sudden childish urge came over me. "Would you mind . . . if I had a whack?"

I pointed at his mallet, and he dropped a blue ball to the ground.

"Did you used to play?"

"For my university."

"Roger!" called one of the players from behind us. He excused himself, and I squared up to the ball. I hadn't played for years, but only through a lack of spare time. It was a fast and furious game, quite unlike its ancient predecessor, although the natural hazards such as rhododendrons and other garden architecture had remained from when it was simply a polite garden sport. I rolled the ball with my foot to plant it firmly on the grass. My old croquet coach had been an ex-league player named Alf Widdershaine, who always told me that concentration made the finest croquet players--and Alf should know, as he had been a pro for the Slough Bombers and retired with 7,892 career hoops, a record yet to be beaten. I looked down the green at the forty-yard right-back hoop. From here it was no bigger than my fingertip. Alf had hooped from up to fifty yards away, but my personal best was only twenty. I concentrated as my fingers clasped the leather grip, and then I raised the mallet and followed through with a hard swing. There was a satisfying *crack*, and the ball hurtled off in a smooth arc--straight into the rhododendrons. Blast. If this had been a match, I would have lost the ball until the next third. I turned around to see if anyone had been watching, but fortunately no one had. Instead an altercation seemed to be going on between the team members. I dropped the mallet and hurried up.

"You can't leave!" cried Aubrey Jambé, hoop defense. "What about the SuperHoop?"

"You'll do fine without me," implored Kapok, "really you will!"

He was standing with two men in suits who didn't appear as though they were in the sports business. I showed them my ID.

"Thursday Next, SpecOps. What's going on?"

The two men looked at one another, but it was the tall one who

spoke.

"We're scouts for the Gloucester Meteors, and we think Mr. Kapok would like to come play for us."

"Less than a week before a SuperHoop?"

"I'm due for a change, Miss Next," said Kapok, glancing about nervously. "I think that Biffo would lead the team far better than me. Don't you think so, Biffo?"

"What about all that 'wild horses' and 'code of the Kapoks' stuff?" I demanded. "You promised!"

"I need to spend more time with my family," muttered Kapok, shrugging his shoulders and clearly not keen to remain in the stadium one second longer than he had to. "You'll be fine--hasn't St. Zvlkx predicted it?"

"Seers aren't always a hundred percent accurate--you said so yourself!" I retorted. "Who are you two really?"

"Leave us out of it," said the tall suited man. "All we did was make an offer--Mr. Kapok decides if he stays or goes."

Kapok and the two men turned to leave.

"Kapok, for God's sake!" yelled Biffo. "The Whackers will knock the stuffing out of the team if you're not here to lead us!"

But Kapok continued walking; his former teammates looked on in disgust and grumbled and swore for a while before the Mallets' manager, a reedy-looking character with a thin mustache and a pale complexion, walked on the green and asked what was going on.

"Ah!" he said when he heard the news. "I'm very sorry to hear that, but since you are all present, I think it's probably the right time to announce that I'm retiring on grounds of ill health."

"When?"

"Right now," said the manager, and ran off. Goliath was working overtime this morning.

"Well," said Aubrey as soon as he had gone, "what now?"

"Listen," I said, "I can't tell you why, but it is historically imperative that we win this SuperHoop. You *will* win this match because you *have* to. It's that simple. Can you captain?" I asked, turning to a burly croquet player named Biffo. I had seen him do "blind passes" across

the rhododendron bushes with uncanny accuracy, and his classic "pegging out" shot from the sixty-yard line during the league game against Southampton was undeniably one of the Top Ten Great Croquet Moments of history. Of course, that was over ten years ago and before a bad tackle had twisted his knee. These days he played defense, guarding the hoops against opposition strikers.

"Not me," he replied with a resigned air.

"Smudger?"

Smudger played attack and had made midair roquets something of a trademark. His celebrated double hoop in the Swindon-Gloucester playoff of 1978 was still talked about, even if it hadn't won us the match.

"Nope," he answered.

"Anyone?"

"I'll captain, Miss Next."

It was Aubrey Jambe. He had been captain once before until a media-led campaign had had him ousted following allegations about him and a chimp.

"Good."

"But we'll need a new manager," said Aubrey slowly, "and since you seem to be so passionate about it, I think you'd better take it on."

Before I knew what I was saying, I had agreed, which went down pretty well with the players. Morale of a sort had returned. I took Aubrey by the arm, and we walked into the middle of the green for our first strategy meeting.

"Okay," I said, "tell me truthfully, Jambe, what are our chances?"

"Borderline impossible," answered Aubrey candidly. "We had to sell our best player to Glasgow to be able to meet the changes that the World Croquet League insisted we do to the green. Then our top defender, Laura de Rematte, won a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Africa on one of those junk-mail prize-draw things. With Kapok gone, we're down to ten players, no reserve, and lost the best striker. Biffo, Smudger, Snake, George and Johnno are all good players, but the rest are second-raters."

"So what do we need to win?"

"If all the players on the Reading team were to die overnight and be

replaced by unfit nine-year-olds, then we might be in with a chance."

"Too difficult and probably illegal. What else?"

Aubrey stared at me glumly. "Five quality players and we might have a chance."

It was a tall order. If they could get to Kapok, they could offer "inducements" to any other player who might want to join us.

"Okay," I said, "leave it to me."

"You have a plan?"

"Of course," I lied, feeling the managerial mantle falling about my shoulders. "Your new players are as good as signed. Besides," I added, with a certain amount of faux conviction, "we've got a revelation to protect."

## Granny Next

### Reading Whackers Confident to Win SuperHoop

Following the surprise resignation of both Roger Kapok and Gray Ferguson from the Swindon Mallets croquet team this afternoon, the Whackers seem almost certain to win next Sunday's SuperHoop, despite the prophecy by St. Zvlkx. Betting shops were being cautious despite the news and lowered the Mallets' odds to 700-1. Miss Thursday Next, the new manager of the Mallets, derided any talk of failure and told waiting reporters that Swindon would triumph. When pressed how that might be so, she declared the interview over.

Article in the *Swindon Evening Blurb*, July 18, 1988

"You're the manager of the Mallets?" asked Bowden with incredulity. "What happened to Gray Ferguson?"

"Bought out, bribed, frightened--who knows?"

"You like being busy, don't you? Does this mean you won't be able to help me get banned books out of England?"

"Have no fear of that," I reassured him. "I'll find a way."

I wished I could share in my own confidence. I told Bowden I'd see him tomorrow and walked out, only to be waylaid by the overzealous Major Drabb, who told me with great efficiency that he and his squad had searched the Albert Schweitzer Memorial Library from top to bottom but had not unearthed a single Danish book. I congratulated him for his diligence and told him to check in with me again tomorrow. He saluted smartly, presented me with a thirty-two-page written report and was gone.

Gran was in the garden of the Goliath Twilight Homes when I stopped by on the way home. She was dressed in a blue gingham frock and was attending to some flowers with a watering can.



"I just heard the news on the wireless. Congratulations!"

"Thanks," I replied without enthusiasm, slumping myself into a large wicker chair. "I have no idea why I volunteered to run the Mallets--I don't know the first thing about running a croquet team!"

"Perhaps," replied Gran, reaching forward to deadhead a rose, "all that is required is faith and conviction--two areas in which, I might add, I think you excel."

"Faith isn't going to conjure up five world-class croquet players, now, is it?"

"You'd be surprised what faith can do, my dear. You have St. Zvlkx's revelation on your side, after all."

"The future isn't fixed, Gran. We *can* lose--and probably will."

She tut-tutted. "Well! Aren't you the Moaning Minnie today! What does it matter if we do lose? It's only a game, after all!"

I slumped even lower. "If it *was* only a game, I wouldn't be worried. This is how my father sees it: Kaine proclaims himself dictator as soon as President Formby dies next Monday. Once he wields ultimate executive power, he will embark on a course of warfare that results in an Armageddon of life-extinguishing capability Level III. We can't stop the President from dying, but we can, my father insists, avoid the world war by simply winning the SuperHoop."

Gran sat down in a wicker chair next to me.

"And then there's Hamlet," I continued, rubbing my temples. "His play has been subjected to a hostile takeover from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and if I don't find a Shakespeare clone pronto, there won't be a *Hamlet* for Hamlet to return to. Goliath tricked me yet again. I don't know what they did, but it felt as though my free will was being sucked out through my eyeballs. They said they'd get Landen back, but, quite frankly, I have my doubts. And I have to illegally smuggle ten truckloads of banned books out of England."

Tirade over, I sighed and was silent. Gran had been thoughtful for a while and, after appearing to come to some sort of a momentous decision, announced, "You know what you should do?"

"What?"

"Take Smudger off defense and make him the midhoop wingman. Jambe should be the striker as usual, but Biffo--"

"Gran! You haven't listened to a word I've said, have you?"

She patted my hand. "Of course I did. Hamlet was having his merry wives smuggled out of England by sucking out his eyeballs, which leads to an Armageddon and the death of the President. Right?"

"Never mind. How are things with you? Found the ten most boring books?"

"Indeed I have," she replied, "but I am loath to finish reading them, as I feel there is one last epiphanic moment to my life that will be revealed just before I die."

"What sort of epiphanic moment?"

"I don't know. Do you want to play Scrabble?"

So Gran and I played Scrabble. I thought I was winning until she got "cazique" on a triple-word score, and it was downhill from there. I lost, 503 points to 319.

## Home Again

### Denmark Blamed for Dutch Elm Disease

"Dutch elm disease was nothing of the sort," was the shock claim from leading arborealists last week. "For many years we had blamed Dutch elm disease on the Dutch," declared Jeremy Acorn, head spokesman of the Knotty Pine Arboreal Research Facility. "So-called Dutch elm disease, a tree virus that killed off nearly all England's elms in the mid-seventies, was thought to have originated in Holland--hence the name." But new research has cast doubt on this long-held hypothesis. "Using techniques unavailable to us in the seventies, we have uncovered new evidence to suggest that Dutch elm disease originated in Denmark." Mr. Acorn went on to say, "We have no direct evidence to suggest that Denmark is engaged in the design and proliferation of arboreological weapons, but we have to maintain an open mind. There are many oaks and silver birches in England at present unprotected against attack." *Arboreal Warfare--Should We Be Worried?* Full report, page 9.

Article in the *Arboreal Times*, July 17, 1988

I hurried home to get there before my mother, as I wasn't sure how she'd react to finding that Friday was being looked after by a gorilla. It was possible that she might not have any problems with this, but I didn't really want to put it to the test.

To my horror Mum had got there before me--and not just her, either. A large crowd of journalists had gathered outside her house, awaiting the return of the Mallets' new manager, and it was only after I had run the gauntlet of a thousand "no comments" that I caught her, just as she was putting her key in the front door.

"Hello, Mother," I said, somewhat breathlessly.

"Hello, daughter."

"Going inside?"

"That's what I usually do when I get home."

"Not thinking of going shopping?" I suggested.

"What are you hiding?"

"Nothing."

"Good."

She pushed the key in the lock and opened the door, giving me a funny look. I ran past her and into the living room, where Melanie was asleep on the sofa, feet up on the coffee table, with Friday snoring happily on her chest. I quickly shut the door.

"He's sleeping!" I hissed to my mother.

"The little lamb! Let's have a look."

"No, better let him be. He's a very light sleeper."

"I can look very quietly."

"Maybe *not* quietly enough."

"I'll look through the serving hatch, then."

"No!"

"Why not?"

"It's jammed. Stuck fast. Meant to tell you this morning, but it slipped my mind. Remember how Anton and I used to climb through it? Got any oil?"

"The serving hatch has never been stuck--"

"How about tea?" I asked brightly, attempting a form of misdirection that I knew my mother would find irresistible. "I want to talk to you about an emotional problem--that *you* might be able to help me with!"

Sadly, she knew me only too well.

"Now I know you're hiding something. Let me in!"

She attempted to push past, but I had a brain wave.

"No, Mother, you'll embarrass them--and yourself."

She stopped. "What do you mean?"

"It's Emma."

"Emma? What about her?"

"Emma . . . and Hamlet."

She looked shocked and covered her mouth with her hand. "In there? On my sofa?"

I nodded.

"Doing . . . you know? Both of them--together?"

"And *very* naked--but they folded the antimacassars first," I added, so as not to shock her too much.

She shook her head sadly. "It's not good, you know, Thursday."

"I know."

"Highly immoral."

"Very."

"Well, let's have that cup of tea, and you can tell me about that emotional problem of yours--is it about Daisy Mutlar?"

"No. I don't have any emotional problems."

"But you said . . . ?"

"Yes, Mother, that was an excuse to stop you barging in on Emma and Hamlet."

"Oh," she said, realization dawning. "Well, let's have a cup of tea anyway."

I breathed a sigh of relief, and Mother walked into the kitchen--to find Hamlet and Emma talking as they did the washing up. Mother stopped dead and stared at them.

"It's disgusting!" she said at last.

"Excuse me?" inquired Hamlet.

"What you're doing in the living room--on *my* sofa."

"What are we doing, Mrs. Next?" asked Emma.

"What are you doing?" flustered my mother, her voice rising. "I'll tell you what you're doing. Well, I won't because it's too--Here, have a look for yourself."

And before I could stop her, she opened the door to the living room to reveal--Friday, alone, asleep on the sofa.

My mother looked confused and stared at me.

"Thursday, just what is going on?"

"I can't even begin to explain it," I replied, wondering where Melanie had gone. It's a big room, but not nearly large enough to hide a gorilla. I leaned in and saw that the French windows were ajar. "Must have been a trick of the light."

"Trick of the light?"

"Yes. May I?"

I closed the door and froze as I noticed Melanie tiptoeing across the lawn, fully visible through the kitchen windows.

"How can it be a trick of the light?"

"I'm . . . not really sure," I stammered. "Have you changed the curtains in here? They look kind of different."

"No. Why didn't you want me to look in the living room?"

"Because . . . because . . . I asked Mrs. Beatty to look after Friday, and I knew you didn't approve, but now she's gone and everything is okay."

"Ah!" said my mother, satisfied at last. I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd got away with it.

"Goodness!" said Hamlet, pointing. "Isn't that a gorilla in the garden?"

All eyes swiveled outside, where Melanie stopped in midstride over the sweet williams. She paused for a moment, gave an embarrassed smile and waved her hand in greeting.

"Where?" said my mother. "All I can see is an unusually hairy woman tiptoeing through my sweet williams."

"That's Mrs. Bradshaw," I murmured, casting an angry glance at Hamlet. "She's been doing some child care for me."

"Well, don't be so rude and let her wander around the garden, Thursday--ask her in!"

Mum put down her shopping and filled the kettle. "Poor Mrs. Bradshaw must think us dreadfully inhospitable. Do you suppose she'd

fancy a slice of Battenberg?"

Hamlet and Emma stared at me, and I shrugged. I beckoned Melanie into the house and introduced her to my mother.

"Pleased to meet you," said Melanie. "You have a very lovely grandchild."

"Thank you," Mum replied, as though the effort had been entirely hers. "I do my best."

"I've just come back from Trafalgar," I said, turning to Lady Hamilton. "Dad's restored your husband, and he said he'd pick you up at eight-thirty tomorrow."

"Oh!" she said, with not quite as much enthusiasm as I had hoped. "That's . . . that's wonderful news."

"Yes," added Hamlet more sullenly, "wonderful news."

They looked at one another.

"I'd better go and pack," said Emma.

"Yes," replied Hamlet, "I'll help you."

And they both left the kitchen.

"What's wrong with them?" asked Melanie, helping herself to a slice of the proffered cake and sitting down on one of the chairs, which creaked ominously.

"Lovesick," I replied. And I think they genuinely were.

"So, Mrs. Bradshaw," began my mother, settling into business mode, "I have recently become an agent for some beauty products, many of which are *completely unsuitable* for people who are bald--if you get my meaning."

"Ooooh!" exclaimed Melanie, leaning closer. She *did* have a problem with facial hair--hard not to, being a gorilla--and had never had the benefit of talking to a cosmetics consultant. Mum would probably end up trying to sell her some Tupperware, too.

I went upstairs, where Hamlet and Emma were arguing. She seemed to be saying that her "dear Admiral" needed her more than anything, and Hamlet said that she should come and live with him at Elsinore and "to hell with Ophelia." Emma replied that this really wasn't practical and then Hamlet made an extremely long and intractable speech which I *think* meant that nothing in the real world was simple

or slick and he lamented the day he ever left his play, and that he was sure Ophelia had discussed country matters with Horatio when his back was turned. Then Emma got confused and thought he was impugning *her* Horatio, and when he explained that it was *his* friend Horatio she changed her mind and said she would come with him to Elsinore, but then Hamlet thought perhaps this wasn't such a good idea after all and he made *another* long speech until even Emma got bored and she crept downstairs for a beer and returned before he'd even noticed she had gone. After a while he just talked himself to a standstill without having made any decision--which was just as well as there wasn't a play for him to return to.





*. . . Melanie stopped in midstride over the sweet williams. She paused for a moment, gave an embarrassed smile and waved her hand in greeting.*

I was just pondering whether finding a cloned Shakespeare was actually going to be possible when I heard a tiny wail. I went back downstairs to find Friday blinking at me from the door to the living room, looking tousled and a little sleepy.

"Sleep well, little man?"

"Sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollit," he replied, which I took

to mean, "I have slept very well and now require a snack to see me through the next two hours."

I walked back into the kitchen, something niggling away at my mind. Something that Mum had said. Something that Stiggins had said. Or maybe Emma? I made Friday a Nutella sandwich, which he proceeded to smear about his face.

"I think you'll find I have just the color for you," said my mother, picking out a shade of gray varnish that suited Melanie's black fur. "Goodness--what strong nails!"

"I don't dig as much as I used to," replied Melanie with an air of nostalgia. "Trafford doesn't like it. He thinks it makes the neighbors talk."

My heart missed a beat, and I shouted out, quite spontaneously, "AHHHHHHHHH!"

My mother jumped and painted a line of nail varnish up Melanie's hand and upset the bottle onto her polka-dot dress.

"Look what you've made me do!" she scolded. Melanie didn't look very happy either.

"Posh, Murray Posh, Daisy Posh, Daisy Mutlar--Why did you . . . mention Daisy Mutlar a few minutes ago?"

"Well, because I thought you'd be annoyed she was still around."

Daisy Mutlar, it must be understood, was someone whom Landen nearly married during our ten-year enforced separation. But that wasn't important. What *was* important is that without Landen there had never been any Daisy. And if Daisy was around, then Landen must be, too--

I looked down at my hand. On my ring finger was . . . a ring. A *wedding* ring. I pulled it forward to the knuckle to reveal a white ridge. It looked as though it had always been there. And if it had . . .

"Where's Landen now?"

"At his house, I should imagine," said my mother. "Are you staying here for supper?"

"Then . . . he's *not* eradicated?"

She looked confused. "Good Lord, no!"

I narrowed my eyes. "Then I didn't ever go to Eradications

Anonymous?"

"Of course not, darling. You know that myself and Mrs. Beatty are the only people who ever attend--and Mrs. Beatty is just there to comfort me. What on earth are you talking about? And come back! Where do you--"

I opened the door and was two paces down the garden path when I remembered I had left Friday behind, so went back to get him, found he had got chocolate all over his front despite the bib, put on his sweatshirt over his T-shirt, found he had glibbed down the front of it, got a clean one, changed his nappy, and--no socks.

"What are you doing, darling?" asked my mother as I rummaged in the laundry basket.

"It's Landen," I babbled excitedly. "He was eradicated, and now he's back, and it's as though he'd never gone, and I want him to meet Friday, but Friday is way way too sticky right now to meet his father."

"Eradicated? Landen? When?" asked my mother incredulously. "Are you sure?"

"Isn't that the point about eradication?" I replied, having found six socks, none of them matching. "No one *ever* knows. It might surprise *you* to know that Eradications Anonymous once had forty or more attendees. When I came, there were fewer than ten. You did a wonderful job, Mother. They'd all be really grateful--if only they could remember."

"Oh!" said my mother in a rare moment of complete clarity. "Then . . . when eradicatees are brought back, it was as if they had never gone. Ergo: the past automatically rewrites itself to take into account the noneradication."

"Well, yes--more or less."

I slipped some odd socks on Friday's feet--he didn't help matters by splaying his toes--then found his shoes, one of which was under the sofa and the other right on top of the bookcase--Melanie *had* been climbing on the furniture after all. I found a brush and tidied his hair, trying desperately to get an annoying crusty bit that smelt suspiciously of baked beans to lie flat. It didn't and I gave up, then washed his face, which he didn't like one bit. I eventually managed to make it out of the door when I saw myself in the mirror and dashed back upstairs. I plonked Friday onto the bed, put on a clean pair of jeans and T-shirt

and tried to do something--*anything*--with my short hair.

"What do you think?" I asked Friday, who was sitting on the dressing table staring at me.

"Aliquippa ex consequat."

"I hope that means ' You look adorable, Mum.' "

"Mollit anim est laborum."

I pulled on my jacket, walked out of my room, came back to brush my teeth and fetch Friday's polar bear, then was out the door again, telling Mum that I might not be back tonight. My heart was still racing as I walked outside, ignored the journalists and popped Friday into the passenger seat of the Speedster, put down the hood--might as well arrive in style--and strapped him in. I put the key in the ignition and then--

"Don't drive, Mum."

Friday *spoke*. I was speechless for a second, hand poised on the ignition.

"Friday?" I said. "You're talking . . . ?"

And then my heart grew cold. He was looking at me with the most serious look I have ever seen on a two-year-old, before or since. And I knew the reason why. Cindy. It was the day of the second assassination attempt. In all the excitement, I had completely forgotten. I slowly and very carefully took my hands off the key and left it where it was, turn signal blinking, oil and generator warning lights burning. I carefully unstrapped Friday, and then, not wanting to open any of the doors, I climbed carefully out of the open top and took him with me. It was a close call.

"Thanks, baby, I owe you--but why did you wait until now to say anything?"

He didn't answer, just put his fingers in his mouth and sucked them innocently.

"Strong silent type, eh? Come on, wonder boy, let's call SO-14."

The police closed the road and the bomb squad arrived twenty minutes later, much to the excitement of the journalists and TV crews. They went live to the networks almost immediately, linking the bomb squad with my new job as the Mallets' manager, filling up any gaps in the story with speculation or, in one case, colorful invention.

The four pounds of explosives had been connected to the starter-motor relay. One more second and Friday and I would have been knocking on the pearly gates. I was jumping up and down with impatience by the time I had given a statement. I didn't tell them this was the second of three assassination attempts, nor did I tell them there would be another attempt at the end of the week. But I wrote it on *my* hand so I wouldn't forget.

"*Windowmaker*," I told them. "Yes, with an *n*--I don't know why. Well, yes--but sixty-eight if you count Samuel Pring. Reason? Who knows? I was the Thursday Next who changed the ending of *Jane Eyre*. Never read it? Preferred *The Professor*? Never mind. It'll be in my files. No, I'm with SO-27. Victor Analogy. His name's Friday. Two years old. Yes, he's very cute, isn't he? You do? Congratulations. No, I'd love to see the pictures. His aunt? Really? Can I go now?"

After an hour they said I could leave, so I plonked Friday into his buggy and pushed him rapidly up to Landen's place. I arrived a bit puffed and had to stop and regain my breath and my thoughts. The house was back to how I remembered it. The tub of *Tickia orologica* on the porch had vanished, along with the pogo stick. Beyond the more tasteful curtains, I could see movement within. I straightened my shirt, attempted to smooth Friday's hair, walked up the garden path and rang the doorbell. My palms felt hot and sweaty, and I couldn't control a stupid grin that had spread all over my face. I was carrying Friday for greater dramatic effect and moved him to the other hip, as he was a bit of a lump. After what seemed like several hours but was, I suspect, less than ten seconds, the door opened to reveal . . . *Landen*, every bit as tall and handsome and as large as life as I had wished to see him all these past years. He wasn't as I remembered him--he was way better than that. My love, my life, the father of my son--made *human*. I felt the tears start to well up in my eyes and tried to say something, but all that came out was a stupid snorty cough. He stared at me, and I stared at him, and then he stared at me some more, and I stared at *him* some more, and then I thought perhaps he didn't recognize me with the short hair, so I tried to think of something really funny and pithy and clever but couldn't, so I shifted Friday to the other hip, as he was becoming even more of a lump with every passing second, and said, rather stupidly:

"It's Thursday."

"I know who it is," he said unkindly. "You've got a bloody nerve, haven't you?"

And he shut the door in my face.

I was stunned for a moment and had to recover my thoughts before I rang the doorbell again. There was another pause that seemed to last an hour but I suspect was only fractionally longer--thirteen seconds, tops--and the door opened again.

"Well," said Landen, "if it isn't Thursday Next."

"And Friday," I replied, "your son."

"My son," replied Landen, deliberately not looking at him, "right."

"What's the matter?" I asked, tears starting to well up again in my eyes. "I thought you'd be pleased to see me!"

He let out a long breath and rubbed his forehead. "It's difficult--"

"What's difficult? How can anything be difficult?"

"Well," he began, "you disappear from my life two and a half years ago. I haven't seen hide nor hair of you. Not a postcard, not a letter, not a phone call--nothing. And then you just turn up at my doorstep as though nothing has happened and I should be pleased to see you!"

I sort of breathed a sigh of relief. Sort of. Somehow I'd always imagined Landen's being uneradicated as just a simple sort of meeting each other after a long absence. I hadn't ever thought that Landen wouldn't *know* he had been eradicated. When he was gone, no one had known he had ever existed, and now that he was back, no one knew he had gone. Not even him.

"Ever heard of an eradication?" I asked.

He shook his head.

I took a deep breath. "Well, two and a half years ago, a chronupt member of SO-12 had you killed at the age of two in an accident. It was a blackmail attempt by a Goliath Corporation member called Brik Schitt-Hawse."

"I remember him."

"Right. And he wanted me to get his half brother out of 'The Raven,' where Bowden and I had trapped him."

"I remember that, too."

"O-kay. So all of a sudden you didn't exist. Everything we had done together hadn't happened. I tried to get you back by going with my

father to your accident in 1947, was thwarted and chose to live inside fiction while little Friday was born and return when I was ready. Which was now. End of story."

We stared at each other for another long moment that might also have been an hour but was probably only twenty seconds. I moved Friday to the other hip again, and then finally he said, "The trouble is, Thursday, that things are different now. You vanished from my life. Gone. I've had to carry on."

"What do you mean?" I asked, suddenly feeling very uneasy.

"Well, the thing is," he went on slowly, "I didn't think you were coming back. *So I married Daisy Mutlar.*"

## Practical Difficulties Regarding Uneradications

### Danish Person Sought

A man of Danish appearance was sought yesterday in connection with an armed robbery at the First Goliath Bank in Banbury. The man, described as being "of Danish appearance," entered the bank at 9:35 and demanded the teller hand over all the money. Five hundred pounds in sterling and a small amount of Danish kroner held in the foreign-currencies department were stolen. Police described this small sum of kroner as of "particular significance" and pledged to wipe out the menace of Danish criminality as soon as possible. The public has been warned to be on the lookout for anyone of Danish appearance, and to let the police know of any Danes acting suspiciously, or failing that, any Danes at all.

Article in *The Toad*, July 15, 1988

You did *what*?"

"Well, you did vanish without a trace--what was I meant to do?"

I couldn't believe it. The little scumbag had sought solace in the arms of a miserable cow who wasn't good enough to carry his bag, let alone be his wife. I stared at him, speechless. I think my mouth might even have dropped open at that point, and I was just wondering whether I should burst into tears, kill him with my bare hands, slam the door, scream, swear or all of the above at the same time when I noticed that Landen was doing that thing he does when he's trying not to laugh.

"You one-legged piece of crap," I said at last, smiling with relief, "you did no such thing!"

"Had you going though, didn't I?" He grinned.

Now I was angry.



"What do you want to go and do that stupid joke for? You know I'm armed and unstable!"

"It's no more stupid than your dopey yarn about me being eradicated!"

"It's *not* a dopey yarn."

"It *is*. If I *had* been eradicated, then there wouldn't be any little boy. . . ."

His voice trailed off, and suddenly all our remonstrations vanished as Friday became the center of attention. Landen looked at Friday, and Friday looked at Landen. I looked at both of them in turn. Then, taking his fingers out of his mouth, Friday said:

"Bum."

"What did he say?"

"I'm not sure. Sounds like a word he picked up from St. Zvlkx."

Landen pressed Friday's nose. "Beep," said Landen.

"Bubbies," said Friday.

"Eradicated, eh?"

"Yes."

"That must be the most preposterous story I have ever heard in my life."

"I have no argument with that."

He paused. "Which I guess makes it too weird not to be true."

We moved towards each other at the same time, and I bumped into his chin with my head. There was a crack as his teeth snapped together, and he yelped in pain--I think he had bitten his tongue. It was as Hamlet said. Nothing is ever slick and simple in the real world. He hated it for that reason--and I loved it.

"What's so funny?" Landen demanded.

"Nothing," I replied. "It's just something Hamlet said."

"Hamlet? Here?"

"No--at Mum's. He was having an affair with Emma Hamilton, whose boyfriend, Admiral Nelson, seems to be trying to commit suicide."

"By what means?"

"The French navy."

"No . . . *no*," said Landen, shaking his head. "Let's just stick with one ludicrously preposterous story at a time. Listen, I'm an author and *I* can't think up the sort of cr--I mean, *nonsense* you get yourself into."

Friday managed to squeeze off one shoe despite the best attention of my double knots and was now tugging at his sock.

"Handsome fellow, isn't he?" said Landen after a pause.

"He takes after his father."

"Nah--his mother. Is his finger stuck permanently up his nose?"

"Most of the time. It's called 'The Search.' An amusing little pastime that has kept small children amused since the dawn of time. Enough, Friday."

He took his finger out with an almost audible *pop* and handed Landen his polar bear.

"Ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip."

"What did he say?"

"I don't know," I replied. "It's something called Lorem Ipsum--a sort of quasi Latin that typesetters use to make up blocks of realistic-looking type."

Landen raised an eyebrow. "You're not joking, are you?"

"They use it a lot in the Well of Lost Plots."

"The *what*?"

"It's a place where all fiction is--"

"Enough!" said Landen, clapping his hands together. "We can't have you telling ridiculous stories here on the front step. Come on in and tell me them inside."

I shook my head and stared at him.

"What?"

"My mother said Daisy Mutlar was back in town."

"She has a job here, apparently."

"Really?" I asked suspiciously. "How do you know?"

"She works for my publisher."

"And you haven't been seeing her?"

"Definitely not!"

"Cross your heart, hope to die?"

He held up his hand.

"Scout's honor."

"Okay," I said slowly, "I believe you." I tapped my lips. "I don't come inside until I get one right here."

He smiled and took me in his arms. We kissed very tenderly, and I shivered.

"Consequat est *laborum*," said Friday, joining in with the hug.

We walked into the house, and I put Friday on the floor. His sharp eyes scanned the house for anything he could pull on top of himself.

"Thursday?"

"Yes?"

"Let's just say for reasons of convenience that I *was* eradicated."

"Yuh?"

"Then everything that happened since the last time we parted outside the SpecOps Building didn't *really* happen?"

I hugged him tightly.

"It did happen, Land. It shouldn't have had, but it did."

"Then the pain I felt was real?"

"Yes. I felt it, too."

"Then I missed you getting bulgy--got any pictures, by the way?"

"I don't think so. But play your cards right and I may show you the stretch marks."

"I can hardly wait." He kissed me again and stared at Friday while an inane grin spread across his face.

"Thursday?"

"What?"

"I have a son!"

I decided to correct him.

"No--we have a son!"

"Right. Well," he said, rubbing his hands together. "I suppose you better have some supper. Do you still like fish pie?"

There was a crash as Friday found a vase in the living room to knock over. So I mopped it up while apologizing, and Landen said it was okay but shut the doors of his office anyway. He made us both supper, and I caught up with what he was doing whilst he wasn't eradicated--if that makes any sense at all--and I told him about Mrs. Tiggy-winkle, WordStorms, Melanie and all the rest of it.

"So a grammasite is a parasitic life-form that lives inside books?"

"Pretty much."

"And if you don't find a cloned Shakespeare, then we lose *Hamlet*?"

"Yup."

"And the SuperHoop is inextricably linked to the avoidance of a thermonuclear war?"

"It is. Can I move back in?"

"I kept the sock drawer just how you liked it."

I smiled. "Alphabetically, left to right?"

"No, rainbow. Violet to the right--or was that how Daisy liked--Ah! Just kidding! You have no sense of--Ah! Stop it! Get off! No! Ow!"

But it was too late. I had pinned him to the floor and was attempting to tickle him. Friday sucked his fingers and looked on, disgusted, while Landen managed to get out of my hands, roll around and tickle *me*, which I didn't like at all. After a while we just collapsed into a silly, giggling mess.

"So, Thursday," he said as he helped me off the floor, "are you going to spend the night?"

"No."

"No?"

"No. I'm moving in and staying forever."

We put Friday to bed in the spare room after making up a sort of cot for him. He was quite happy sleeping almost anywhere as long as he had his polar bear with him. He'd stayed over at Melanie's house and once at Mrs. Tiggy-winkle's, which was warm and snug and smelt of moss, sticks and washing powder. He had even slept on *Treasure Island* during a visit there I made last year to sort out the Ben Gunn goat problem--Long John had talked him to sleep, something he was very good at.

"Now, then," said Landen as we went across to our room, "a man's needs are many--"

"Let me guess! You want me to rub your back?"

"Please. Right there in the small where you used to do it so well. I've really missed that."

"Nothing else?"

"No, nothing. Why, did you have something in mind?"

I giggled as he pulled me closer. I breathed in his scent. I could remember pretty well what he looked like and how he sounded, but not his smell. That was something that was instantly recognizable as soon as I pressed my face into the folds of his shirt, and it brought back memories of courting, and picnics, and passion.

"I like your short hair," said Landen.

"Well, I don't," I replied, "and if you ruffle it once more like that, I may feel inclined to poke you in the eye."

We lay back on the bed, and he pulled my sweatshirt very slowly over the top of my head. It caught on my watch, and there was an awkward moment as he tugged gently, trying to keep the romance of the moment. I couldn't help it and started giggling.

"Oh, do please be serious, Thursday!" he said, still pulling at the sweatshirt. I giggled some more, and he joined in, then asked if I had any scissors and finally removed the offending garment. I started to undo the buttons of his shirt, and he nuzzled my neck, something that gave me a pleasant tingly sensation. I tried to flip off my shoes, but they were lace-ups, and when one finally came off, it shot across the room and hit the mirror on the far wall, which fell off and smashed.

"Bollocks!" I said. "Seven years' bad luck."

"That was only a two-year mirror," explained Landen. "You don't get the full seven-year jobs from the pound shop."

I tried to get the other shoe off and slipped, striking Landen's shin--which wasn't a problem, as he had lost a leg in the Crimea and I'd done it several times before. But there wasn't a hollow *bong* sound as usual.

"New leg?"

"Yeah! Do you want to see?"

He removed his trousers to reveal an elegant prosthesis that looked as though it had come from an Italian design studio--all curves, shiny metal and rubber absorption joints. A thing of beauty. A leg amongst legs.

"Wow!"

"Your uncle Mycroft made it for me. Impressed?"

"You bet. Did you keep the old one?"

"In the garden. It has a hibiscus in it."

"What color?"

"Blue."

"Light blue or dark blue?"

"Light."

"Have you redecorated this room?"

"Yes. I got one of those wallpaper books and couldn't make up my mind which one to use, so I just took the samples out of the book and used them instead. Interesting effect, don't you think?"

"I'm not sure that the Regency Flock matches Bonzo the Wonder Hound."

"Perhaps," he conceded, "but it was very economical."

I was nervous as hell, and so was he. We were talking about everything but what we really wanted to talk about.

"Shh!"

"What?"

"Was that Friday?"

"I didn't hear anything."

"A mother's hearing is finely attuned. I can hear a half-second wail across ten shopping aisles."

I got up and went to have a look, but he was fast asleep, of course. The window was open, and a cooling breeze moved the muslin curtains ever so slightly, causing shadows of the streetlights to move across his face. How much I loved him, and how small and vulnerable he was. I relaxed and once more regained control of myself. Apart from a stupid drunken escapade that luckily went nowhere, my romantic involvement with anyone had been the sum total of zip over the past two and a half years. I had been waiting for this moment for ages. And now I was acting like a lovesick sixteen-year-old. I took a deep breath and turned to go back to our bedroom, taking off my T-shirt, trousers, remaining shoe and socks as I walked, half hobbled and hopped down the corridor. I stopped just outside the bedroom door. The light was off, and there was silence. This made things easier. I stepped naked into the bedroom, padded silently across the carpet, slipped into bed and snuggled up to Landen. He was wearing pajamas and smelt different. The light switched on, and there was a startled scream from the man lying next to me. It wasn't Landen but Landen's *father*--and next to him, his wife, Houson. They looked at me, I looked back, stammered "Sorry, wrong bedroom," and ran out of the room, grabbing my clothes from the heap outside the bedroom door. But I wasn't in the wrong room, and the lack of a wedding ring confirmed what I feared. Landen had been returned to me--only to be taken away again. Something had gone wrong. The uneradication hadn't held.

"Don't I recognize you?" said Houson, who came out of the bedroom and stared at me as I retrieved Friday from the spare bedroom, where he was tucked up next to Landen's aunt Ethel.

"No," I replied, "I've just walked into the wrong house. Happens all the time."

I left my shoes and trotted downstairs with Friday tucked under my arm, picked up my jacket from where it was hanging on the back of a different chair in a differently furnished front room and ran into the night, tears streaming down my face.

## Breakfast with Mycroft

### Feathered Friend Found Tarred

Swindon's mysterious seabird asphalt-smotherer has struck again, this time a stormy petrel found in an alleyway off Commercial Road. The unnamed bird was discovered yesterday covered in a thick glutinous coating that forensic scientists later confirmed as crude oil. This is the seventh such attack in less than a week and the Swindon police are beginning to take notice. "This has been the seventh attack in less than a week," declared a Swindon policeman this morning, "and we are beginning to take notice." The inexplicable seabird tarrer has so far not been seen, but an expert from the NSPB told the police yesterday that the suspect would probably have a displacement of 280,000 tons, be covered in rust and be floundering on a nearby rock. Despite numerous searches by police in the area, a suspect of this description has not yet been found.

Article in the *Swindon Daily Eyestrain*, July 18, 1988

It was the following morning. I was sitting at the kitchen table staring at my ring finger and the complete absence of a wedding band. Mum walked in wrapped in a dressing gown and with her hair in curlers, fed DH-82, let Alan out of the broom cupboard, where we had to keep him these days, and pushed the delinquent dodo outside with a mop. He made an angry plinking noise, then attacked the bootscraper.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"It's Landen."

"Who?"

"My husband. He was reactualized last night, but only for about two hours."



"My poor darling! That must be *very* awkward."

"Awkward. Extremely. I climbed naked into bed with Mr. and Mrs. Parke-Laine."

My mother went ashen and dropped a saucer. "Did they recognize you?"

"I don't think so."

"Thank the GSD for that!" she gasped, greatly relieved. Being embarrassed in public was something she cared to avoid more than anything else, and having a daughter climbing into bed with patrons of the Swindon Toast League was probably the biggest faux pas she could think of.

"Good morning, pet," said Mycroft, shuffling into the kitchen and sitting down at the breakfast table. He was my extraordinarily brilliant inventor uncle and apparently had just returned from the 1988 Mad Scientists' Conference, or MadCon-88, as it was known.

"Uncle," I said, probably with less enthusiasm than I should, "how good to see you again!"

"And you, my dear," he said kindly. "Back for good?"

"I'm not sure," I replied, thinking about Landen. "Aunt Polly well?"

"The very best of health. We've been to MadCon--I was given a Lifetime Achievement Award for something, but for the life of me I can't think what, or why."

It was a typically Mycroft statement. Despite his undoubted brilliance, he never thought he was doing anything particularly clever or useful--he just liked to tinker with ideas. It was his Prose Portal invention that got me inside books in the first place. He had set up home in the Sherlock Holmes canon to escape Goliath but had remained stuck there until I rescued him about a year ago.

"Did Goliath ever bother you again?" I asked. "After you came back, I mean?"

"They tried," he replied softly, "but they didn't get anything from me."

"You wouldn't tell them anything?"

"No. It was better than that. I *couldn't*. You see, I can't remember a single thing about any of the inventions they wanted me to talk about."

"How is that possible?"

"Well," replied Mycroft, taking a sip of tea, "I'm not sure, but, logically speaking, I must have invented a memory-erasure device or something and used it selectively on myself and Polly--what we call the Big Blank. It's the only possible explanation."

"So you can't remember how the Prose Portal actually works?"

"The what?"

"The Prose Portal. A device for entering fiction."

"They were asking me about something like that, now you mention it. It's very intriguing to try to redevelop it, but Polly says I shouldn't. My lab is full of devices, the purpose of which I haven't the foggiest notion about. An Ovinator, for example--it's clearly something to do with eggs--but what?"

"I don't know."

"Well, perhaps it's all for the best. These days I only work for peaceful means. Intellect is worthless if it isn't for the betterment of us all."

"I'll agree with you on that one. What work were you presenting to MadCon-88?"

"Theoretical Nextian Mathematics, mostly," replied Mycroft, warming to the subject dearest to his heart--his work. "I told you all about Nextian Geometry, didn't I?"

I nodded.

"Well, Nextian Number Theory is very closely related to that, and in its simplest form allows me to work *backwards* to discover the original sum from which the product is derived."

"Eh?"

"Well, say you have the numbers 12 and 16. You multiply them together and get 192, yes? Well, in conventional maths, if you were given the number 192, you would not know how that number was arrived at. It might just as easily have been 3 times 64 or 6 times 32 or even 194 minus 2. But you couldn't tell just from *looking* at the number alone, now, could you?"

"I suppose not."

"You suppose wrong," said Mycroft with a smile. "*Nextian* Number

Theory works in an inverse fashion from ordinary maths--it allows you to discover the precise *question* from a stated *answer*."

"And the practical applications of this?"

"Hundreds." He pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket and passed it over. I unfolded it and found a simple equation written upon it:  $2216,091$  minus 1, or 2 raised to the power of  $216,091$ , minus 1.

"It looks like a big number."

"It's a *medium*-size number," he corrected.

"And?"

"Well, if I were to give you a short story of ten thousand words, instructed you to give a value for each letter and punctuation mark and then wrote them down, you'd get a number with sixty-five thousand or so digits. All you need to do then is to find a simpler way of expressing it. Using a branch of Nextian Maths that I call FactorZip, we can reduce any size number to a short, notated style."

I looked at the equation in my hand again. "So this is . . . ?"

"A FactorZipped *Sleepy Hollow*. I'm working on reducing all the books ever written to an equation less than fifty digits long. Makes you think, eh? Instead of buying a newspaper every day, you'd simply jot down today's equation and pop it in your Nexpaning Calculator to read it."

"Ingenious!" I breathed.

"It's still early days, but I hope one day to be able to predict a cause simply by looking at the event. And after that, trying to construct unknown questions from known answers."

"Such as?"

"Well, the answer 'Good Lord no, *quite* the reverse.' I've always wanted to know the question to *that*."

"Right," I replied, still trying to figure out how you'd know by looking at the number nine that it had got there by being three squared or the square root of eighty-one.

"Isn't it just?" he said with a smile, thanking my mother for the bacon and eggs she had just put down in front of him.

Lady Hamilton's departure at eight-thirty was really sad only for

Hamlet. He went into a glowering mood and made up a long soliloquy about his heart that was aching fit to break and how cruel a fate life's hand had dealt him. He said that Emma was his one true love and her departure made his life bereft; a life that had little meaning and would be better ended--and so on and so forth until eventually Emma had to interrupt him and thank him but she really *must* go or else she'd be late for something she couldn't specify. So he then screamed abuse at her for five minutes, told her she was a whore and marched out, muttering something about being a chameleon. With him gone we could all get on with our good-byes.

"Good-bye, Thursday," said Emma, holding my hand. "You've always been very kind to me. I hope you get your husband back. Would you permit me to afford you a small observation that I think might be of help?"

"Of course."

"Don't let Smudger dominate the forward hoop positions. He works best in defense, especially if backed up by Biffo--and play offensively if you want to win."

"Thank you," I said slowly, "you're very kind."

I gave her a hug, and my mother did, too--a tad awkwardly, as she had never fully divested herself of the suspicion that Emma had been carrying on with Dad. Then, a moment later, Emma vanished--which must be what it was like when Father arrives and stops the clock for other people.

"Well," said my mother, wiping her hands on her apron, "that's her gone. I'm glad she got her husband back."

"Yes," I agreed somewhat diffidently, and walked off to find Hamlet. He was outside, sitting on the bench in the rose garden, deep in thought.

"You okay?" I asked, sitting down next to him.

"Tell me truthfully, Miss Next. Do I dither?"

"Well--not really."

"Truthfully now!"

"Perhaps . . . a *bit*."

Hamlet gave a groan and buried his face in his hands.

"Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I! A slave to this play with

contradictions so legion that scholars write volumes attempting to explain me. One moment I love Ophelia, the next I treat her cruelly. I am by turns a petulant adolescent and a mature man, a melancholy loner and a wit telling actors their trade. I cannot decide whether I'm a philosopher or a moping teenager, a poet or a murderer, a procrastinator or a man of action. I might be truly mad or sane *pretending* to be mad or even mad pretending to be sane. By all accounts my father was a war-hungry monster--was Claudius's act of assassination so bad after all? Did I *really* see a ghost of my father or was it Fortinbras in disguise, trying to sow discord within Denmark? How long did I spend in England? How old am I? I've watched sixteen different film adaptations of *Hamlet* and two plays, read three comic books and listened to a wireless adaptation. Everything from Olivier to Gibson to Barrymore to William Shatner in *Conscience of the King*."

"And?"

"Every single one of them is different."

He looked around in quiet desperation for his skull, found it, and then stared at it meditatively for a few moments before continuing. "Do you have any idea the pressure I'm under being the world's leading dramatic enigma?"

"It must be intolerable."

"It is. I'd feel worse if anyone else had figured me out--but they haven't. Do you know how many books there are about me?"

"Hundreds?"

"Thousands. And the slanders they write! The Oedipal thing is by far the most insulting. The good-night kiss with Mum has got longer and longer. That Freud fellow will have a bloody nose if ever I meet him. My play is a complete and utter mess--four acts of talking and one of action. Why does anyone trouble to watch it?"

His shoulders sagged and he appeared to sob quietly to himself. I rested a hand on his shoulder.

"It is your *complexity* and philosophical soul-searching that we pay money to see--you are the quintessential tragic figure, questioning everything, dissecting all life's shames and betrayals. If all we wanted was action, we'd watch nothing but Chuck Norris movies. It is your journey to resolving your demons that makes the play the prevaricating tour de force that it is."

"All four and a half hours of it?"

"Yes," I said, wary of his feelings, "all four and a half hours of it."

He shook his head sadly.

"I wish I could agree with you but I need more answers, Horatio."

"Thursday."

"Yes, her, too. More answers and a new facet to my character. Less talk, more action. So I have secured the services . . . of a conflict-resolution consultant."

This didn't sound good at all.

"Conflict resolution? Are you sure that's wise?"

"It might help me resolve matters with my uncle--and that twit Laertes."

I thought for a moment. An all-action Hamlet might not be such a good idea, but since he had no play to return to, it at least gave me a few days' breathing space. I decided not to intervene for the time being.

"When are you talking to him?"

He shrugged. "Tomorrow. Or perhaps the day after. Conflict-resolution advisers are pretty busy, you know."

I breathed a sigh of relief. True to form, Hamlet was still dithering. But he had brightened up, having come to a decision of sorts, and continued in a more cheery tone. "But that's enough about me. How goes it with you?"

I gave him a brief outline, beginning with Landen's reeducation and ending with the importance of finding five good players to help Swindon win the SuperHoop.

"Hmm," he replied as soon as I had finished. "I've got a plan for you. Want to hear it?"

"As long as it's not about where Biffo should play."

He shook his head, looked around carefully and then lowered his voice. "Pretend to be mad and talk a lot. Then--and this is the important bit--do *nothing at all* until you absolutely have to and then make sure everyone dies."

"Thanks," I said at length, "I'll remember that."

"Plink!" said Alan, who had been padding grumpily around the

garden.

"I think that bird is looking for trouble," observed Hamlet.

Alan, who clearly didn't like Hamlet's attitude, decided to attack and made a lunge at Hamlet's shoe. It was a bad move. The Prince of Denmark leapt up, drew his sword and, before I could stop him, made a wild slash in Alan's direction. He was a skilled swordsman and did no more damage than to pluck the feathers off the top of Alan's head. The little dodo, who now had a bald patch, opened his eyes wide and looked around him with a mixture of horror and awe at the small feathers that were floating to the ground.

"Any more from *you*, my fine feathered friend," announced Hamlet, replacing his sword, "and you'll be in the curry!"

Pickwick, who had been watching from a safe corner near the compost heap, boldly strode out and stood defiantly between Alan and Hamlet. I'd never seen her acting brave before, but I suppose Alan was her son, even if he was a hooligan. Alan, either terrified or incensed, stood completely motionless, beak open.

"Telephone for you," my mother called out. I walked into the house and picked up the receiver. It was Aubrey Jambe. He wanted me to speak to my old coach Alf Widdershaine to get him out of retirement and also to know if I had found any new players yet.

"I'm working on it," I said, rummaging through the Yellow Pages under "Sports Agents." "I'll call you back. Don't lose hope, Aubrey."

He harrumphed and rang off. I called Wilson Lonsdale & Partners, England's top sports agents, and was delighted to hear there were any number of world-class croquet players available; sadly, the interest evaporated when I mentioned which team I represented.

"Swindon?" said one of Lonsdale's associates. "I've just remembered--we don't have anyone on our books at all."

"I thought you said you had?"

"It must have been a clerical error. Good day."

The phone went dead. I called several others and received a similar response from all of them. Goliath and Kaine were obviously covering all their bases.

Following that, I called Alf Widdershaine and, after a long chat, managed to persuade him to go down to the stadium and do what he could. I called Jambe back to tell him the good news about Alf,

although I thought it prudent to hide the lack of new players from him for the time being.

I thought about Landen's existence problem for a moment and then found the number of Julie Aseizer, the woman at Eradications Anonymous who had got her husband back. I called her and explained the situation.

"Oh, yes!" she said helpfully. "My Ralph flickered on and off like a faulty lightbulb until his uneradication held!"

I thanked her and put the phone down, then checked my finger for a wedding ring. It still wasn't there.

I glanced into the garden and saw Hamlet walking on the lawn, deep in thought--with Alan following him at a safe distance. As I watched, Hamlet turned to him and glared. The small dodo went all sheepish and laid his head on the ground in supplication. Clearly Hamlet wasn't just a fictional Prince of Denmark but also something of an alpha dodo.

I smiled to myself and wandered into the living room where I found Friday building a castle out of bricks with Pickwick helping. Of course, "helping" in this context meant "watching." I glanced at the clock. Time for work. Just when I could do with some relaxing brick-building therapy. Mum agreed to look after Friday and I gave him a kiss good-bye.

"Be good."

"Arse."

"What did you say?"

"Pikestaff."

"If those are rude Old English words, St. Zvlkx is in a lot of trouble--and so are you, my little fellow. Mum, sure you're okay?"

"Of course. We'll take him to the zoo."

"Good. No, wait--*we*?"

"Bismarck and I."

"Mum!?"

"What? Is there any reason a more or less widowed woman can't



have a bit of male company from time to time?"

"Well," I stammered, feeling unnaturally shocked for some reason. "I suppose no reason at all."

"Good. Be off with you. After we've gone to the zoo we might drop in at the tea rooms. And then the theater."

She had started to go all dreamy so I left, shocked not only that Mother might be even *considering* some sort of a fling with Bismarck, but that Joffy might have been right.

## Weird Shit on the M4

George Formby was born George Hoy Booth in Wigan in 1904. He followed his father into the music-hall business, adopted the ukulele as his trademark, and by the time the war broke out, he was a star of variety, pantomime and film. During the first years of the war, he and his wife Beryl toured extensively for ENSA, entertaining the troops as well as making a series of highly successful movies. When invasion of England was inevitable, many influential dignitaries and celebrities were shipped out to Canada. Moving underground with the English resistance and various stalwart regiments of the Local Defence Volunteers, Formby manned the outlawed "Wireless St. George" and broadcast songs, jokes and messages to secret receivers across the country. The Formbys used their numerous contacts in the north to smuggle Allied airmen to neutral Wales and form resistance cells that harried the Nazi invaders. In postwar republican England, he was made nonexecutive President for Life.

John Williams, *The Extraordinary Career of George Formby*

I avoided the news crews who were staking out the SpecOps Building and parked at the rear. Major Drabb was waiting for me as I walked into the entrance lobby. He saluted smartly but I detected a slight reticence about him this morning. I handed him another scrap of paper. "Good morning, Major. Today's assignment is the Museum of the American Novel in Salisbury."

"Very . . . good, Agent Next."

"Problems, Major?"

"Well," he said, biting his lip nervously, "yesterday you had me searching the library of a famous Belgian and today the Museum of the American Novel. Shouldn't we be searching more, well, *Danish* facilities?"

I pulled him aside and lowered my voice. "That's *precisely* what they would be expecting us to do. These Danes are clever people. You wouldn't expect them to hide their books in somewhere as obvious as the Wessex Danish Library, now would you?"

He smiled and tapped his nose.

"Very astute, Agent Next."

Drabb saluted again, clicked his heels and was gone. I smiled to myself and pressed the elevator call button. As long as Drabb didn't report to Flanker I could keep this going all week.

Bowden was not alone. He was talking to the last person I would expect to see in a LiteraTec office: Spike.

"Yo, Thursday," Spike said.

"Yo, Spike."

He wasn't smiling. I feared it might be something to do with Cindy, but I was wrong.

"Our friends in SO-6 tell us there's some seriously weird shit going down on the M4," he announced, "and when someone says 'weird shit' they call--"

"You."

"Bingo. But the weird shit merchant can't do it on his own, so he calls--"

"Me."

"Bingo."

There was another officer with them. He wore a dark suit typical of the upper SpecOps divisions, and he looked at his watch in an unsubtle manner.

"Time is of the essence, Agent Stoker."

"What's the job?" I asked.

"Yes," returned Spike, whose somewhat laid-back attitude to life-and-death situations took a little getting used to. "What is the job?"

The suited agent looked impassively at us both.

"Classified," he announced. "But I am authorized to tell you this:

unless we get \*\*\*\*\* back in under \*\*\*\*\*\_\*\*\*\*\* hours, then \*\*\*\*\* will seize ultimate executive \*\*\*\*\* and you can \*\*\*\*\* good-bye to any semblance of \*\*\*\*\*."

"Sounds pretty \*\*\*\*\*ing serious," said Spike, turning back to me. "Are you in?"

"I'm in."

We were driven without explanation to the roundabout at Junction 16 of the M4 motorway. SO-6 were national security, which made for some interesting conflicts of interest. The same department protecting Formby also protected Kaine. And for the most part the SO-6 agents looking after Formby did so against Kaine's SO-6 operatives who were more than keen to see him gone. SpecOps factions always fought, but rarely from within the same department. Kaine had a lot to answer for.

In any case, I didn't like them and neither did Spike, and whatever it was they wanted it would have to be pretty weird. No one calls Spike until every avenue has been explored. He was the last line of defense before rationality started to crumble.

We pulled onto the verge, where two large black Bentley limousines were waiting for us. Parked next to them were six standard police cars, with the occupants looking bored and waiting for orders. Something pretty big was going down.

"Who's she?" demanded a tall agent with a humorless demeanor as soon as we stepped from the car.

"Thursday Next," I replied, "SO-27."

"Literary Detectives?" he sneered.

"She's good enough for me," said Spike. "If I don't get my own people, you can do your own weird shit."

The SO-6 agent looked at the pair of us in turn. "ID."

I showed him my badge. He took it, looked at it for a moment, then passed it back.

"My name is Colonel Parks," said the agent. "I'm head of Presidential Security. This is Dowding, my second in command."

Spike and I exchanged looks. The President. This really *was* serious.

Dowding, a laconic figure in a dark suit, nodded his greeting as Parks continued:

"Firstly, I must point out to you both that this is a matter of great national importance, and I am asking for your advice only because we are desperate. We find ourselves in a head-of-state-deficit condition by virtue of a happenstance of a high-otherworldlinesspossibility situation--and we hoped you might be able to reverse-engineer us out of it."

"Cut the waffle," said Spike. "What's going on?"

Parks's shoulders slumped, and he took off his dark glasses. "We've lost the President."

My heart missed a beat. This was *bad* news. Really bad news. The way I saw it, the President wasn't due to die until next Monday, *after* Kaine and Goliath had been neutered. Formby's going missing or dying early allowed Kaine to gain power and start World War III a week before he was meant to--and that was certainly *not* in the game plan.

Spike thought for a moment and then said, "Bummer."

"Quite."

"Where?"

Parks swept his arm towards the busy traffic speeding past on the motorway. "Somewhere out there."

"How long ago?"

"Twelve hours. Chancellor Kaine has got wind of it, and he's pushing a parliamentary vote to establish himself dictator at six o'clock this evening. That gives us less than eight hours."

Spike nodded thoughtfully. "Show me where you last saw him."

Parks snapped his fingers, and a black Bentley drew up alongside. We climbed in, and the limo joined the M4 in a westerly direction, the police cars dropping in behind to create a rolling road-block. Within a few miles, our lane of the busy thoroughfare was deserted and quiet. As we drove on, Parks explained what had happened. President Formby was being driven from London to Bath along the M4, and somewhere between Junctions 16 and 17--where we now were--he vanished.

The Bentley glided to a halt on the empty asphalt.

"The President's car was the center vehicle in a three-car motorcade," explained Parks as we got out. "Saundby's car was behind, I was with Dowding in front, and Mallory was driving the President. At this precise point, I looked behind and noticed that Mallory was indicating to turn off. I saw them move onto the hard shoulder, and we pulled over immediately."

Spike sniffed the air. "And then what happened?"

"We lost sight of the car. We thought it had gone over the embankment, but when we got there--nothing. Not a bramble out of place. The car just vanished."

We walked to the edge and looked down the slope. The motorway was carried above the surrounding countryside on an earth embankment; there was a steep slope that led down about fifteen feet through ragged vegetation to a fence. Beyond this was a field, a concrete bridge over a drainage ditch and beyond that, about half a mile distant, a row of white houses.

"Nothing *just* vanishes," said Spike at last. "There is always a reason. Usually a simple one, sometimes a weird one--but always a reason. Dowding, what's your story?"

"Pretty much the same. His car started to pull over, then just . . . well, vanished from sight."

"Vanished?"

"More like *melted*, really," said a confused Dowding. Spike rubbed his chin thoughtfully and bent down to pick up a handful of roadside detritus. Small granules of toughened glass, shards of metal and wires from the lining of a car tire. He shivered.

"What is it?" asked Parks.

"I think President Formby's gone . . . deadside."

"Then where's the body? In fact, where's the car?"

"There are three types of dead," said Spike, counting on his fingers. "Dead, undead and semidead. Dead is what we call in the trade 'spiritually bereft'--the life force is extinct. Those are the lucky ones. Undead are the 'spiritually challenged' that I seem to spend most of my time dealing with. Vampires, zombies, bogeys and what have you."

"And the semidead?"

"Spiritually *ambiguous*. Those that are moving on from one state to

another or in a spiritual limbo--what you and I generally refer to as *ghosts*."

Parks laughed out loud, and Spike raised an eyebrow, the only outward sign of indignation I had ever seen him make.

"I didn't ask you along so I could listen to some garbage about ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasties, Officer Stoker."

"Don't forget 'things that go bump in the night,' " countered Spike. "You won't believe how bad a thing can bump if you don't deal with it quick."

"Whatever. As far as I can see, there is one state of dead and that's 'not living.' Now, do you have anything useful to add to this investigation or not?"

Spike didn't answer. He stared hard at Parks for a moment and then scrambled down the embankment towards a dead and withered tree. It had leafless branches that looked incongruous amongst the summer greenery, and the plastic bags that had caught in its branches moved lazily in the breeze. Parks and I looked at one another, then slid down the bank to join him. We found Spike examining the short grass with great interest.

"If you have a theory, you should tell us," said Parks, leaning against the tree. "I'm getting a bit bored with all this New Age mumbo jumbo."

"We *all* visit the realm of the semidead at some point," continued Spike, picking at the ground with his fingers like a chimp checking a partner for fleas, "but for most of us it is only a millisecond as we pass from one realm to the next. Blink and you'll miss it. But there are *others*. Others who loiter around in the world of the semidead for years. The 'spiritually ambiguous' who don't know they are dead, or, in the case of the President, there by accident."

"And . . . ?" asked Parks, who was becoming less keen on Spike with each second that passed. Spike carried on rummaging in the dirt, so the SO-6 agent shrugged resignedly and started to walk back up the embankment.

"He didn't stop for a leak at Membury or Chievley services, did he?" announced Spike in a loud voice. "I wonder if he even went at Reading."

Parks stopped, and his attitude changed abruptly. He slid clumsily back down the embankment and rejoined us.

"How did you know that?"

Spike looked around at the empty fields. "There is a motorway services here."

"There *was* going to be one," I corrected, "but after Kington St--I mean, Leigh Delamare was built, it wasn't considered necessary."

"It's here all right," replied Spike, "just occluded from our view. This is what happened: The President needs a leak and tells Mallory to pull over at the next services. Mallory is tired, and his mind is open to those things usually hidden from our sight. He sees what he *thinks* are the services and pulls over. For a fraction of a second, the two worlds touch--the presidential Bentley moves across--and then part again. I'm afraid, ladies and gentlemen, that President Formby has accidentally entered a gateway to the underworld--a living person adrift in the abode of the dead."

There was deathly quiet.

"That is the most insanely moronic story I have ever been forced to listen to," announced Parks, not wanting to lose sight of reality for even one second. "If I listened to a gaggle of lunatics for a month, I'd not hear a crazier notion."

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Parks, than are dreamt of in *your* philosophy."

There was a pause as the SO-6 agent weighed up the facts.

"Do you think you can get him back?" he asked at last.

"I fear not. The spirits of the semidead will be flocking to him like moths to a light, trying to feed off his life force and return *themselves* to the land of the living. Such a trip would almost certainly be suicidal."

Parks sighed audibly. "All right. How much?"

"Ten grand. Realm-of-the-dead-certain-to-die work pays extra."

"Each?"

"Since you mention it, why not?"

"Okay then," said Parks with a faint grin, "you'll get your blood money--but only on results."

"Wouldn't have it any other way."

Spike beckoned me to follow him, and we climbed back over the fence, the SO-6 agents staring at us, unsure of whether to be



impressed or have us certified or what.

"That really put the wind up them!" hissed Spike as we scrambled to the top of the embankment, across bits of broken bumpers and shards of plastic moldings. "Nothing like a bit of that wooo-wooo crossing-over-into-the-spirit-world stuff to scare the crap out of them!"

"You mean you were making all that up?" I asked, not without a certain degree of nervousness in my voice. I had been on two jobs with Spike before. On the first I was nearly fanged by a vampire, on the second almost eaten by zombies.

"I wish," he replied, "but if we make it look too easy, then they don't cough up the big moola. It'll be a cinch! After all, what do we have to lose?"

"Our lives?"

"Dahhhh! You must loosen up a bit, Thursday. Look upon it as an experience--part of death's rich tapestry. You ready?"

"No."

"Good. Let's hit those semideads where it hurts!"

By the fifth time we had driven the circuit between Junctions 16 and 17 and without so much as a glimpse of anything other than bored motorists and a cow or two, I was beginning to wonder whether Spike really knew what he was doing.

"Spike?"

"Mmm?" he replied, concentrating on the empty field that he thought might contain the gateway to the dead.

"What *exactly* are we looking for?"

"I don't have the foggiest idea, but if the President can make his way in without dying, so can we. Are you sure you won't put Biffo on midhoop attack? He's wasted on defense. You could promote Johnno to striker and use Jambe and Snake to build up defense."

"If I don't find another five players, it might not matter anyway," I replied. "I managed to get Alf Widdershaine out of retirement to coach, though. You used to play county croquet, didn't you?"

"No way, Thursday."

"Oh, go on."

"No."

There was a long pause. I stared out the window at the traffic, and Spike concentrated on driving, every now and then looking expectantly into the fields by the side of the road. I could see this was going to be a long day, so it seemed as good a time as any to broach the subject of Cindy. I wasn't keen to kill her, and Spike, I knew, would be less than happy to see her dead.

"So . . . when did you and Cindy tie the knot?"

"About eighteen months ago. Have you ever visited the realm of the dead?"

"Orpheus told me about the Greek version of it over coffee once--but only the highlights. Does she . . . er . . . have a job?"

"She's a librarian," replied Spike, "part-time. I've been there a couple of times; it's not half as creepy as you'd have thought."

"The library?"

"The abode of the dead. Orpheus would have paid the ferryman, but, you know, that's just a scam. You can easily do it yourself; those inflatable boats from Wal-Mart work a treat."

I tried to visualize Spike paddling his way to the underworld on a brightly colored inflatable boat but quickly swept it aside.

"So . . . which library does Cindy work in?"

"The one in Highclose. They have day care, so it's very convenient. I want to have another kid, but Cindy's not sure. How's your husband, by the way--still eradicated?"

"Wavering between 'to be' and 'not to be' at the moment."

"So there's hope, then?"

"There's always hope."

"My sentiments entirely. Ever had a near-death experience?"

"Yes," I replied, recalling the time I was shot by a police marksman in an alternative future.

"What was it like?"

"Dark."

"That sounds like a plain old common or garden-variety death experience," replied Spike cheerfully. "I get them all the time. No, we need something a bit better than that. To pass over into the dark realm, we need to just come within spitting distance of the Grim Reaper and hover there, tantalizingly just out of his reach."

"And how are we going to achieve that?"

"Haven't a clue."

He turned off the motorway at Junction 17 and took the entrance ramp back onto the opposite carriageway to do another circuit.

"What did Cindy do before you were married?"

"She was a librarian then, too. She comes from a long line of dedicated Sicilian librarians--her brother is a librarian for the CIA."

"The CIA?"

"Yes, he spends the time traveling the world--cataloging their books, I presume."

It seemed as though Cindy was wanting to tell him what she really did but couldn't pluck up the courage. The truth about Cindy might easily shock him, so I thought I'd better plant a few seeds of doubt. If he could figure it all out himself, it would be a great deal less painful.

"Does it pay well, being a librarian?"

"Certainly does!" exclaimed Spike. "Sometimes she is called away to do freelance contract work--emergency card-file indexing or something--and they pay her in used notes, too--in suitcases. Don't know how they manage it, but they do."

I sighed and gave up.

We drove around twice more. Parks and the rest of the SO-6 spooks had long since got bored and driven off, and I was beginning to get a little tired of this myself.

"How long do we have to do this for?" I asked as we drove onto the Junction 16 roundabout for the seventh time, the sky darkening and small spots of rain appearing on the windshield. Spike turned on the wipers, which squeaked in protest.

"Why, am I keeping you from something?"

"I promised Mum she wouldn't have to look after Friday past five."

"What are grannies for? Anyway, you're working."

"Well, that's not the point, is it?" I answered. "If I annoy her, she may decide not to look after him again."

"She should be grateful for it. My parents love looking after Betty, although Cindy doesn't have any--they were both shot by police marksmen while being librarians."

"Doesn't that strike you as unusual?"

He shrugged. "In my line of work, it's difficult to know what unusual is."

"I know the feeling. Are you sure you don't want to play in the SuperHoop?"

"I'd sooner attempt root-canal work on a werewolf." He pressed his foot hard on the accelerator and weaved around the traffic that was waiting to return to the westbound M4. "I'm bored with all this. Death, drape your sable coat upon us!"

Spike's car shot forward and rapidly gathered speed down the slip road as a deluge of summer rain suddenly dumped onto the motorway, so heavy that even with the wipers on full speed, it was difficult to see. Spike turned on the headlights, and we joined the motorway at breakneck speed, through the spray of a passing juggernaut, before pulling into the fast lane. I glanced at the speedometer. The needle was just touching ninety-five.

"Don't you think you'd better slow down?" I yelled, but Spike just grinned maniacally and overtook a car on the inside.

We were going almost a hundred when Spike pointed out the window and yelled, "Look!"

I gazed out my window to the empty fields; there was nothing but a curtain of heavy rain falling from a leaden sky. As I stared, I suddenly glimpsed a sliver of light as faint as a will-o'-the-wisp. It might have been anything, but to Spike's well-practiced eye, it was just what we'd been looking for--a chink in the dark curtain that separates the living from the dead.

"Here we go!" yelled Spike, and he pulled the wheel hard over. The side of the M4 greeted us in a flash, and I had just the barest glimpse of the embankment, the white branches of the dead tree and rain swirling in the headlights before the wheels thumped hard on the drainage ditch and we left the road. There was a sudden smoothness as we were airborne, and I braced myself for the heavy landing. It

didn't happen. A moment later we were driving slowly into a motorway services in the dead of night. The rain had stopped, and the inky black sky had no stars. We had arrived.

## Dauntsey Services

*Art is long, and Time is fleeting,  
And our hearts, though stout and brave,  
Still, like muffled drums, are beating  
Funeral marches to the grave.*  
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,  
"A Psalm of Life"

We motored slowly in and parked next to where Formby's Bentley was standing empty with the keys in the ignition.

"Looks like we're still in time. What sort of plan do you suggest?"

"Well, I understand a lyre seems to work quite well--and not looking back has something to do with it."

"Optional, if you ask me. My strategy goes like this: We locate the President and get the hell out. Anyone who tries to stop us gets bashed. What do you think?"

"Wow!" I muttered. "You planned this down to the smallest detail, didn't you?"

"It has the benefit of simplicity."

Spike looked around at the number of people entering the motorway services building. "This gateway isn't just for road accidents," he muttered, opening the boot of the car and taking out a pump-action shotgun. "From the numbers, I reckon this portal must service most of Wessex and a bit of Oxfordshire as well. Years ago there was no need for this sort of place. You just croaked, then went up or down. Simple."

"So what's changed?"

Spike tore open a box of cartridges and pushed them one by one

into the shotgun. "The rise of secularism has a hand in it, but mostly it's down to CPR. Death takes a hold--you come here, someone resuscitates you, you leave."

"Right. So what's the President doing here?"

Spike filled his pockets with cartridges and placed the sawn-off shotgun in a long pocket on the inside of his duster. "An accident. He's not meant to be here at all--like us. Are you packing?"

I nodded.

"Then let's see what's going on. And act dead--we don't want to attract any attention."

We strode slowly down the parking lot towards the motorway services. Tow trucks that pulled the empty cars of the departed souls drove past, vanishing into the mist that swathed the exit ramp.

We opened the doors to the services and stepped in, ignoring a Royal Automobile Club man who tried in a desultory manner to sell us membership. The interior was well lit, airy, smelt vaguely of disinfectant and was pretty much identical to every other motorway services I had ever been in. The visitors were the big difference. Their talking was muted and low and their movements languorous, as though the burden of life was pressing heavily on their shoulders. I noticed also that although many people were walking *in* the main entrance, not so many people were walking *out*.

We passed the phones, which were all out of order, and then walked towards the canteen, which smelt of stewed tea and pizza. People sat around in groups, talking softly, reading out-of-date newspapers or sipping coffee. Some of the tables had a number on a stand that designated some unfulfilled food order.

"Are all these people dead?" I asked.

"Nearly. This is only a gateway, remember. Have a look over there." Spike pulled me to one side and pointed out the bridge that connected us--the Southside services--to the other side, the Northside. I looked out the grimy windows at the pedestrian bridge that stretched in a gentle arc across the carriageways towards nothingness.

"No one comes back, do they?"

"The undiscover'd country from whose bourn no traveler returns, ' " replied Spike. "It's the last journey we ever make."

The waitress called out a number. "Thirty-two?"

"Here!" said a couple quite near us.

"Thank you, the Northside is ready for you now."

"Northside?" echoed the woman. "I think there's been some sort of mistake. We ordered fish, chips and peas for two."

"You can take the pedestrian footbridge over there. Thank you!"

The couple grumbled and muttered a bit to themselves but got up nonetheless and walked slowly up the steps to the footbridge and began to cross. As I watched, their forms became more and more indistinct until they vanished completely. I shivered and looked by way of comfort towards the living world and the motorway. I could dimly make out the M4 streaming with rush-hour traffic, the headlights shining and sparkling on the rain-soaked asphalt. The living, heading home to meet their loved ones. What in God's name was I doing here?

I was interrupted from my thoughts by Spike, who nudged me in the ribs and pointed. On the far side of the canteen was a frail old man who was sitting by himself at a table. I'd seen President Formby once or twice before, but not for about a decade. According to Dad, he would die of natural causes in six days, and it wouldn't be unkind to say that he looked it. He was painfully thin, and his eyes seemed sunken into his sockets. His teeth, so much a trademark, more protruding than ever. A lifetime's entertaining can be punishing, a half lifetime in politics doubly so. He was hanging on to keep Kaine from power, and by the look of it, he was losing and knew it.

I moved to get up but Spike murmured:

"We might be too late. Look at his table."

There was a "Number 33" sign in front of him. I felt Spike tense and lower his shoulders, as though he had seen someone he recognized but didn't want them to see him.

"Thursday," he whispered, "get the President to my car by whatever means you can before the waitress comes back. I have to take care of something. I'll see you outside."

"What? Hey, Spike!"

But he was away, moving slowly amongst the lost souls milling around the newsagent until he was gone from sight. I took a deep breath, got up and crossed to Formby's table.



"Hullo, young lady!" said the President. "Where are me bodyguards?"

"I've no time to explain, Mr. President, but you need to come with me."

"Oh, well," he said agreeably, "if you say so--but I've just ordered pie and chips. Could eat a horse and probably will, too!" He grinned and laughed weakly.

"We must go," I urged. "I will explain everything, I promise!"

"But I've already paid--"

"Table 33?" said the waitress, who had crept up behind me.

"That's us," replied the President cheerfully.

"There's been a problem with your order. You're going to have to leave for the moment, but we'll keep it hot for you."

I breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn't meant to be dead, and the staff knew it.

"Now can we go?"

"I'm not leaving until I get a refund," he said stubbornly.

"Your life is in danger, Mr. President."

"Been in danger many times, young lady, but I'm not leaving till I get my ten bob back."

"I will pay it," I replied. "Now, let's get out of here."

I heaved him to his feet and walked him to the exit. As we pushed open the doors and stumbled out, three disreputable-looking men appeared from the shadows. They were all armed.

"Well, well!" said the first man, who was dressed in a very tired and battered SpecOps uniform. He had stubble, oily hair and was pale to the point of cadaverousness. With one hand he held an aged SpecOps-issue revolver, and the other was planted firmly on the top of his head. "Looks like we've got some live ones here!"

"Drop your gun," said the second.

"You'll live to regret this," I told him, but realized the stupidity of the comment as soon as I had said it.

"Way too late for that!" he replied. "Your gun, if you please."

I complied, and he grabbed Formby and took him back inside while the first man picked up my gun and put it in his pocket.

"Now you," said the first man again, "inside. We've got a little trading to do, and time is fleeting."

I didn't know where Spike was, but he had sensed the danger, that much was certain. I supposed he had a plan, and if I delayed, perhaps it would help.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing much," laughed the man who had his hand pressed firmly on his head, "just . . . your *soul*."

"Looks like a good one, too," said the third man, who was holding some sort of humming meter and was pointing it in my direction. "*Lots* of life in this one. The old man has only six days to run--we won't get much for that."

I didn't like the sound of this, not one little bit.

"Move," said the first man, indicating the doors.

"Where to?"

"Northside."

"Over my dead body."

"That's the poi--"

The third man didn't finish his sentence. His upper torso exploded into a thousand dried fragments that smelt of moldy vegetables. The first man whirled around and fired in the direction of the cafeteria, but I seized the opportunity and ran back into the car park to take cover behind a car. After a few moments, I peered out cautiously. Spike was inside, trading shots with the first man, who was pinned behind the presidential Bentley, still with his hand on his head. I cursed myself for giving up my weapon, but as I stared at the scene--the nighttime, the motorway services--a strong sense of *deja vu* welled up inside me. No, it was stronger than that--I *had* been here before--during a leap through time nearly three years ago. I had witnessed the jeopardy I was in and left a gun for myself. I looked around. Behind me a man and a woman--Bowden and myself, in point of fact--were jumping into a Speedster--*my* Speedster. I smiled and dropped to my knees, feeling under the car tire for the weapon. My hands closed around the automatic and I flicked off the safety and moved from the car, firing as I went. The first man saw me and ran for cover amongst

the milling crowds, who scattered, terrified. I cautiously entered the now seemingly deserted services and rejoined Spike just inside the doorway of the shop. We had a commanding position of the stairs to the connecting bridge; no one was going Northside without passing us. I dropped the magazine out of my automatic and reloaded.

"The tall guy is Chesney, my ex-partner from SO-17," announced Spike as he reloaded his shotgun. "The necktie covers the decapitation wound I gave him. He has to hold his head to stop it falling off."

"Ah. I wondered why he was doing that. But losing his head--that makes him dead, right?"

"Usually. He must be bribing the gateway guardians or something. It's my guess he's running some sort of soul-reclamation scam."

"Wait, wait," I said, "slow down. Your ex-partner, Chesney--who is dead--is now running a service pulling souls out of the netherworld?"

"Looks like it. Death doesn't care about personalities--he's more interested in meeting quotas. After all, one departed soul is very like another."

"So ..."

"Right. Chesney swaps the soul of someone deceased for the soul of someone healthy and living."

"I'd say, 'You're shitting me,' but I've got a feeling you're not."

"I wish I was. Nice little earner, I'm sure. It looks like that's where Formby's driver, Mallory, went. Okay, here's the plan: we'll do a hostage swap for the President, and once you're in their custody, I'll get Formby to safety and return for you."

"I've got a better idea," I replied. "How about we swap *you* for Formby and *I* go to get help?"

"I thought you knew all about the underworld from your bosom pal Orpheus?" countered Spike with a trace of annoyance.

"It was highlights over coffee--and anyway, you've done it before. What was that about an inflatable boat from Wal-Mart to paddle yourself to the underworld?"

"Well," said Spike slowly, "that was more of a hypothetical journey, really."

"You haven't a clue what you're doing, do you?"

"No. But for ten grand, I'm willing to take a few risks."

We didn't have time to argue further, as several shots came our way. There was a frightened scream from a customer as one of the bullets reduced a magazine shelf to confetti. Before I knew it, Spike had fired his shotgun into the ceiling, where it destroyed a light fixture in a shower of bright sparks.

"Who shot at us?" asked Spike. "Did you see?"

"I think it's fair to say that it wasn't the light fixture."

"I had to shoot at something. Cover me."

He jumped up and fired. I joined him, fool that I was. I had thought that my being out of my depth was okay because Spike vaguely knew what he was doing. Now that I was certain this was *not* the case, escape seemed a very good option indeed. After firing several shots ineffectively down the corridor, we stopped and dropped back behind the corner.

"Chesney!" shouted Spike. "I want to talk to you!"

"What do you want here?" came a voice. "This is my patch!"

"Let's have a head-to-head," replied Spike, stifling a giggle. "I'm sure we can come to some sort of arrangement!"

There was a pause, and then Chesney's voice rang out again:

"Hold your fire. We're coming out."

Chesney stepped out into the open, just next to the children's helicopter ride and a *Coriolanus* WillSpeak machine. His remaining henchman joined him, holding the President.

"Hello, Spike," said Chesney. He was a tall man, who looked as though he didn't have a drop of liquid blood in his entire body. "I haven't forgiven you for killing me."

"I kill vampires for a living, Dave. You became one--*I had to*."

"Had to?"

"Sure. You were about to sink your teeth into an eighteen-year-old virgin's neck and turn her into a lifeless husk willing to do your every bidding."

"Everyone should have a hobby."

"Train sets, I tolerate," Spike replied. "Spreading the seed of

vampirism, I do not."

He nodded towards Chesney's neck. "Nasty scratch you have there."

"Very funny. What's the deal?"

"Simple. I want President Formby back."

"And in return?"

Spike turned the shotgun towards me. "I give you Thursday. She's got bags of life left in her. Give me your gun, sweetheart."

"What?" I yelled in a well-feigned cry of indignation.

"Do as I say. The President must be protected at all costs--you told me so yourself."

I handed the gun over.

"Good. Now move forward."

I walked slowly up the concourse, the cowering visitors watching us with a sort of morbid fascination. We stopped ten yards apart just near the game-arcade area.

"Send the President to me."

Chesney nodded to his henchman who let him go. Formby, a little confused by now, tottered up to us.

"Now send me Thursday."

"Whoa!" said Spike. "Still using that old SpecOps-issue revolver? Here, have her automatic--she won't need it anymore."

And he tossed my gun towards his ex-partner. Chesney, in an unthinking moment, went to catch the gun--but with the hand he used to keep his head on. Unrestrained, his head wobbled dangerously. He tried to grab it, but this made matters worse, and his head tumbled off to the front, past his flailing hands, where it hit the floor with the sound of a large cabbage. This unseemly situation had distracted Chesney's number two, who was then disarmed by a blast from Spike's shotgun. I didn't see why Spike should have all the fun, so I ran forward and caught Chesney's head on the bounce and expertly booted it through the door of the arcade, where it scored a direct hit into the SlamDunk! basketball game, earning three hundred points. Spike had thumped the now confused and headless Chesney in the stomach and retrieved both my automatics. I grabbed the President, and we legged it for the car park while Chesney's head screamed obscenities from

where he was stuck upside down in the SlamDunk! basket.

"Well . . ." Spike smiled as we reached his car. "Chesney really lost his--"

"No," I said, "don't say it. It's too corny."

"Is this some sort of theme park?" asked Formby as we bundled him into Spike's car.

"Of a sort, Mr. President," I replied as we reversed out of the parking lot with a squealing of tires and tore towards the exit ramp. No one tried to stop us, and a couple of seconds later, we were blinking in the daylight--and the rain--of the M4 westbound. The time, I noticed, was 5:03--lots of time to get the President to a phone and oppose Kaine's vote in parliament. I put out my hand to Spike, who shook it happily and returned my gun, which was still covered in the desiccated dust of Chesney's hoodlum friend.

"Did you see the look on his face when his head started to come off?" Spike asked, chuckling. "Man, I live for moments like that!"

## The Cat Formerly Known as Cheshire

### Danish King in Tidal Command Fiasco

In another staggering display of Danish stupidity, King Canute of Denmark attempted to use his authority to halt the incoming tide, our reporters have uncovered. It didn't, of course, and the dopey monarch was soaked. Danish authorities were quick to deny the story and rushed with obscene haste to besmirch the excellent and unbiased English press with the following lies: "For a start it wasn't Canute--it was *Cnut*," began the wild and wholly unconvincing tirade from the Danish minister of propaganda. "You English named him Canute to make it sound less like you were ruled by foreigners for two hundred years. And Cnut didn't try to command the sea--it was to demonstrate to his overly flattering courtiers that the tide wouldn't succumb to his will. And it all happened nine hundred years ago--if it happened at all." King Canute himself was unavailable for comment.

Article in *The Toad*, July 18, 1988

We told the President that yes, he was right--the whole thing was some sort of motorway services theme park. Dowding and Parks were genuinely pleased to get their President back, and Yorrick Kaine canceled the vote in parliament. Instead he led a silent prayer to thank providence for returning Formby to our midst. As for Spike and me, we were each given a postdated check and told we would be sure to receive the Banjulele with Oak Clusters for our steadfast adherence to duty.

Spike and I parted after the tiring day's work and I returned to the SpecOps office where I found a slightly annoyed Major Drabb waiting for me near my car.

"No Danish books found again, Agent Next!" he said through clenched teeth, handing me his report. "More failure and I will have to

take the matter to higher authority."

I glared at him, took a step closer and prodded him angrily in the chest. I needed Flanker off my back until the SuperHoop at the very least.

"You blame me for your failings?"

"Well," he said, faltering slightly and taking a nervous step backwards as I moved even closer, "that is to say--"

"Redouble your efforts, Major Drabb, or I will have you removed from your command. Do you understand?"

I shouted the last bit, which I didn't want to do--but I was getting desperate. I didn't want Flanker on my back in addition to everything else that was going on.

"Of course," croaked Drabb. "I take full responsibility for my failure."

"Good," I said, straightening up, "tomorrow you are to search the Australian Writers' Guild in Wooten Bassett."

Drabb dabbed his brow and made another salute.

"As you say, Miss Next."

I tried to drive past the mixed bag of journalists and TV news crews, but they were more than insistent so I stopped to say a few words.

"Miss Next," said a reporter from ToadSports, jostling with the five or six other TV crews trying to get the best angle, "what is your reaction to the news that five of the Mallets team members have withdrawn following death threats?"

This was news to me but I didn't show it.

"We are in the process of signing new players to the team--"

"Miss Manager, with only five players in your team, don't you think it better to just withdraw?"

"We'll be playing, I assure you."

"What is your response to the rumor that the Reading Whackers have signed ace player Bonecrusher McSneed to play forward hoop?"

"The same as always--the SuperHoop will be a momentous victory for Swindon."



"And what about the news that you have been declared 'unfit to manage' given your highly controversial move of putting Biffo on defense?"

"Positions on the field are yet to be decided and are up to Mr. Jambe. Now if you'll excuse me . . ."

I started the engine again and drove away from the SpecOps Building, the news crews still shouting questions after me. I was big news again, and I didn't like it.

I arrived home just in time to rescue Mother from having to make more tea for Friday.

"Eight fish fingers!" she muttered, shocked by his greed. "Eight!"

"That's nothing," I replied, putting my paycheck into a novelty teapot and tickling Friday on the ear. "You wait until you see how many beans he can put away."

"The phone's been ringing all day. Aubrey somebody-or-other about death threats or something?"

"I'll call him. How was the zoo?"

"Ooh!" she cooed, touched her hair and tripped out of the kitchen. I waited until she was gone then knelt down close to Friday.

"Did Bismarck and Gran . . . kiss?"

"Tempor incididunt ut labore," he replied enigmatically, "et do-lore magna aliqua."

"I hope that's a 'definitely not,' darling," I murmured, filling up his beaker. As I did so, I caught my wedding ring on the lip of the cup, and I stared at it in a resigned manner. Landen was back again. I clasped it tightly and picked up the phone.

"Hello?" came Landen's voice.

"It's Thursday."

"Thursday!" he said with a mixture of relief and alarm. "What happened to you? I was waiting for you in the bedroom, and then I heard the front door close! Did I do something wrong?"

"No, Land, nothing. You were eradicated again."

"Am I still?"

"Of course not."

There was a long pause. Too long, in fact. I looked at my hand. My wedding ring had gone again. I sighed, replaced the receiver and went back to Friday, heavy in heart. I called Aubrey as I was giving Friday his bath and tried to reassure him about the missing players. I told him to keep training and I'd deliver. I wasn't sure how, but I didn't tell him that. I just said it was "in hand."

"I have to go," I told him at last. "I've got to wash Friday's hair and I can't do it with one hand."

That evening, as I was reading *Pinocchio* to Friday, a large tabby cat appeared on the wardrobe in my bedroom. He didn't appear instantly, either--he faded in from the tip of his tail all the way up to his very large grin. When he first started working in *Alice in Wonderland*, he was known as the Cheshire Cat, but the authorities moved the Cheshire county boundaries, and he thus became the Unitary Authority of Warrington Cat, but that was a bit of a mouthful, so he was known more affectionately as the Cat formerly known as Cheshire or, more simply, the Cat. His real name was Archibald, but that was reserved for his mother when she was cross with him.

He worked very closely with us at Jurisfiction, where he was in charge of the Great Library, a cavernous and almost infinite depository of every book ever written. But to call the Cat a librarian would be an injustice. He was an uberlibrarian--he knew about all the books in his charge. When they were being read, by whom--everything. Everything, that is, except where Yorrick Kaine was a featured part. Friday giggled and pointed as the Cat stopped appearing and stared at us with a grin etched on his features, eagerly listening to the story.

"Hello!" he said as soon as I had finished, kissed Friday and put out the bedside light. "I've got some information for you."

"About?"

"Yorrick Kaine."

I took the Cat downstairs, where he sat on the microwave as I made some tea.

"So what have you found out?" I asked.

"I've found out that an alligator isn't someone who makes allegations--it's a large reptile a bit like a crocodile."

"I mean about Kaine."

"Ah. Well, I've had a careful trawl, and he doesn't appear anywhere in the character manifests, either in the Great Library or the Well of Lost Plots. Wherever he's from, it isn't from published fiction, poetry, jokes, nonfiction or knitting patterns."

"I didn't think you'd come out here to tell me you've failed, Chesh," I said. "What's the good news?"

The Cat's eyes flashed, and he twitched his whiskers. "Vanity publishing!" he announced with a flourish.

It was an inspired guess. I'd never even considered he might be from there. The realm of the self-published book was a bizarre mix of quaint local histories, collections of poetry, magnum opuses of the truly talentless--and the occasional gem. The thing was, if such books became officially published, they were welcomed into the Great Library with open arms--and that hadn't happened.

"You're sure?"

The Cat handed me an index card. "I knew this was important to you, so I called in a few favors."

I read the card aloud. " '*At Long Last Lust*. 1931. Limited-edition run of one hundred. Author: Daphne Farquitt.' "

I looked at the Cat. Daphne Farquitt. Writer of nearly five hundred romantic novels and darling of the romance genre.

"Before she got famous writing truly awful books, she used to write truly awful books that were self-published," explained the Cat. "In *At Long Last Lust*, Yorrick plays a local politician eager for advancement. He isn't a major part either. He's only mentioned twice and doesn't even warrant a description."

"Can you get me into the vanity-publishing library?" I asked.

"There is no vanity library," he said with a shrug. "We have figures and short reviews gleaned from vanity publishers' manifests and *Earnest Scribbler Monthly*, but little else. Still, we need only to find one copy and he's ours."

He grinned again, but I didn't join him.

"Not that easy, Cat. Take a look at this."

I showed him the latest issue of *The Toad*. The Cat carefully put on his spectacles and read, " 'Danish book-burning frenzy reaches new

heights, with Copenhagen-born Farquitt's novels due to be consigned to flames.'

"I don't get it," said the Cat, placing a longing paw on a Moggilicious Cat Food advert. "What's he up to, burning all her books?"

"Because," I said, "he obviously can't find all the original copies of *At Long Last Lust* and in desperation has whipped up anti-Danish feeling as a cover. With luck his book-burning idiots will do the job for him. I'm a fool not to have realized. After all, where would you hide a stick?"

There was a long pause.

"I give up," said the Cat. "Where would you hide a stick?"

"In a forest."

I stared out the window thoughtfully. *At Long Last Lust*. I didn't know how many of the hundred copies still remained, but with Farquitt's books still being consigned to the furnaces, I figured there had to be at least one. An unpublished Farquitt novel the key to destroying Kaine. I couldn't make this stuff up.

"Why would you hide a stick in a forest?" asked the Cat, who had been pondering over this question for some moments in silence.

"It's an analogy," I explained. "Kaine needs to get rid of every copy of *At Long Last Lust* but doesn't want us to get suspicious, so he targets the Danes--the *forest*, rather than Farquitt--the *stick*. Get it?"

"Got it."

"Good."

"Well, I'd better be off then," announced the Cat and he vanished.

I was not much surprised at this for the Cat usually left in this manner. I poured the tea, added some milk, and then put some mugs on a tray. I was just pondering where I might find a copy of *At Long Last Lust* and, more important, calling Julie again to ask her how long her husband flicked on and off "like a lightbulb," when the Cat reappeared balanced precariously on the Kenwood mixer.

"By the by," he said, "the Gryphon tells me that the sentencing for your Fiction Infraction is due in two weeks' time. Do you want to be present?"

This related to the time I changed the ending of *Jane Eyre*. They found me guilty at my trial but the law's delay in the BookWorld just

dragged things on and on.

"No," I said after a pause. "No, tell him to come and find me and let me know what my sentence will be."

"I'll tell him. Well, toodle-oo," said the Cat, and vanished, this time for good.

I pushed open the door of Mycroft's workshop with my toe, held it open for Pickwick to follow me in, then closed it before Alan could join us and placed the tray on a worktop. Mycroft and Polly were staring intently at a small and oddly shaped geometric solid made of brass.

"Thank you, pet," said Polly. "How are things with you?"

"Fair to not very good at all, Auntie."

Polly was Mycroft's wife of some forty-two years and, although seemingly in the background, was actually almost as brilliant as her husband. She was a bouncy seventy and managed Mycroft's often irascible and forgetful nature with a patience that I found inspiring. "The trick," she told me once, "is to regard him like a five-year-old with an IQ of two hundred sixty." She picked up her tea and blew on it.

"Still thinking about whether to put Smudger on defense?"

"I was thinking of Biffo, actually."

"Smudger and Biffo would both be wasted on defense," muttered Mycroft, making a fine adjustment on one face of the brass polyhedron with a file. "You ought to put Snake on defense. He's untried, I admit, but he plays well and has youth on his side."

"Well, I'm really leaving team strategy to Aubrey."

"I hope he's up to it. What do you make of this?"

He handed me the solid, and I turned the grapefruit-size object over in my hands. Some of the faces were odd-sided and some even-sided--and some, strangely enough, appeared to be *both*, and my eyes had trouble making sense of it.

"Very . . . pretty," I replied. "What does it do?"

"Do?" Mycroft smiled. "Put it on the worktop, and you'll see what it do!"

I placed it on the surface, but the oddly shaped solid, unstable on the face I had placed it upon, tipped onto another. Then, after a moment's pause, it wobbled again and fell onto a third. It carried on in this jerky fashion across the worktop until it fell against a screwdriver, where it stopped.

"I call it a Nextahedron," announced Mycroft, picking up the solid and placing it on the floor, where it continued its random perambulations, watched by Pickwick, who thought it might be chasing her and ran away to hide. "Most irregular solids are only unstable on one or two faces. The Nextahedron is unstable on *all* its faces--it will continue to fall and tip until a solid object impedes its progress."

"Fascinating!" I murmured, always surprised by the ingenuity of Mycroft's inventions. "But what's the point?"

"Well," explained Mycroft, warming to the subject, "you know those inertial-generator things that self-wind a wristwatch?"

"Yes?"

"If we have a larger one of those inside a Nextahedron weighing six hundred tons, I calculate we could generate as much as a hundred watts of power."

"But . . . but that's only enough for a lightbulb!"

"Considering the input is nil, I think it's a remarkable achievement," replied Mycroft somewhat sniffily. "To generate significant quantities of power, we'd have to carve something of considerable mass--Mars, say--into a huge Nextahedron with a flat plate falling around the exterior, held firm by gravity. The power could be transmitted to Earth using Tesla beams and . . ."

His voice trailed off as he started to sketch ideas and equations in a small notebook. I watched the Nextahedron fall and rock and jiggle across the floor until it fell against a roll of wire.

"On a more serious note," confided Polly, putting down her tea, "you could help us identify some of the devices in the workshop. Since both Mycroft and I have taken the Big Blank, you might be able to help."

"I'll try," I said, looking around the room at the bizarre devices. "That one over there guesses how many pips there are in an unopened orange, the one with the horn is an Olfactograph for measuring smells, and the small box thing there can change gold into lead."

"What's the point in that?"

"I'm not entirely sure."

Polly made notes against her inventory, and I spent the next ten minutes trying to name as many of Mycroft's inventions as I could. It wasn't easy. He didn't tell me everything.

"I'm not sure what this one is either," I said, pointing at a small machine about the size of a telephone directory lying on a workbench.

"Oddly enough," replied Polly, "this is one we do have a name for. It's an Ovinator."

"How do you know if you can't remember?"

"Because," said Mycroft, who had finished his notes and now rejoined us, "it has 'Ovinator' engraved on the case just there. We think it's either a device for making eggs without the need of a chicken or for making chickens without the need of an egg. Or something else entirely. Here, I'll switch it on."

Mycroft flicked a switch and a small red light came on.

"Is that it?"

"Yes," replied Polly, staring at the small and very unexciting metallic box thoughtfully.

"No sign of any eggs or chickens," I observed.

"None at all," sighed Mycroft. "It might just be a machine for making a red light come on. Drat my lost memory! Which reminds me: any idea which device actually *is* the memory eraser?"

We looked around the workshop at the odd and mostly anonymous contraptions. Any one of them might have been used to erase memories, but then any one of them might have been a device for coring apples, too.

We stood in silence for a moment.

"I still think you ought to have Smudger on defense," said Polly, who was probably the biggest croquet fan in the house.

"You're probably right," I said, suddenly feeling that it would be easier just to go with the flow. "Uncle?"

"Polly knows best," he replied. "I'm a bit tired. Who wants to watch *Name That Fruit!* on the telly?"

We all agreed that it would be a relaxing way to end the day, and I

found myself watching the nauseating quiz show for the first time in my life. Halfway through, I realized just how bad it was and went to bed, temples aching.



## Neanderthal Nation

### Neanderthals "of Use" at Politicians' Training College

Neanderthals, the reengineered property of the Goliath Corporation, found unexpected employment at the Chipping Sodbury College for Politicians yesterday when four selected individuals were inducted as part of the Public Office Veracity Economics class. Neanderthals, whose high facial-acuity skills make them predisposed to noticing an untruth, are used by students to hone their lying skills--something that trainee politicians might find useful once in a position of office. "Man, those thals can spot everything!" declared Mr. Richard Dixon, a first-year student. "Nothing gets past them--even a mild embellishment or a tactical omission!" The lecturers at the college declared themselves wholly pleased with the neanderthals and privately admitted that "if the proletariat were even half as good at spotting lies, we'd really be in the soup!"

Article in *The Toad* (political section), July 4, 1988

The hunt for *At Long Last Lust* had been going on all morning, but with little success. Kaine had almost two years' head start on us. Of the one hundred copies in the print run, sixty-two of them had changed hands within the past eighteen months. Initially they had been sold for modest sums of PS1,000 or so, but there is nothing like a mystery buyer with deep pockets to push up the price, and the last copy sold was for PS720,000 at Agatha's Auction House--an unprecedented sum, even for a prewar Farquitt.

The likelihood of finding a copy of *Lust* was looking increasingly desperate. I called Farquitt's agent, who said that the author's entire library had been confiscated and the septuagenarian author questioned at length about pro-Danish political activism before being released. Even a visit to the Library of Farquitt in Didcot didn't bear

any fruit--both their original manuscript of *At Long Last Lust* and a signed copy had been seized by "government agents" nearly eighteen months before. The librarian met us in the sculpted marble hall and after telling us not to talk so loudly, reported that representative copies of all Farquitt's works were packed and ready for removal "as soon as we wanted." Bowden responded that we'd be heading towards the border just as soon as we finalized the details. He didn't look at me as he said it, but I knew what he was thinking--I still needed to figure out a way to get us across the border.

We drove back to the LiteraTec office in silence, and as soon as we got in, I called Landen. My wedding ring, which had been appearing and disappearing all morning, had been solid for a good twenty minutes.

"Yo, Thursday!" he said enthusiastically. "What happened to you yesterday? We were talking, and you just went quiet."

"Something came up."

"Why don't you come around for lunch? I've got fish fingers, beans and peas--with mashed banana and cream for pudding."

"Have you been discussing the menu with Friday?"

"Whatever made you think that?"

"I'd love to, Land. But you're still a bit existentially unstable at the moment, so I'd only end up embarrassing myself in front of your parents again--and I've got to go and meet someone to talk about Shakespeares."

"Anyone I know?"

"Bartholomew Stiggins."

"The neanderthal?"

"Yes."

"Hope you like beetles. Call me when I exist next. I lo--"

The phone went dead. My wedding ring had gone again, too.

I listened to the dial tone for a moment, tapping the receiver thoughtfully on my forehead. "I love you too, Land," I said softly.

"Your Welsh contact?" asked Bowden, walking up with a fax from the Karen Blixen Appreciation Society.

"Not exactly."

"New players for the SuperHoop, then?"

"If only. Goliath and Kaine have frightened every player in the country except Penelope Hrah, who'll play for food and doesn't care what anyone says, thinks or does."

"Didn't she have a leg torn off during the Newport Strikers v. Dartmoor Wanderers semifinal a few years back?"

"I'm in no position to be choosy, Bowd. If I put her on back-hoop defense, she can just growl at anyone who comes close. Ready for lunch?"

The neanderthal population of Swindon numbered about three hundred, and they all lived in a small village to the west known as the Nation. Because of their tool-using prowess, they were just given six acres of land, water and sewage points and told to get on with it, as if they needed to be asked, which they didn't.

The neanderthals were not humans nor descendants of ours, but cousins. They had evolved at the same time as us, then been forced into extinction when they failed to compete successfully with the more aggressive human. Brought back to life by Goliath BioEngineering in the late thirties and early forties, they were as much a part of modern life as dodos or mammoths. And since they had been sequenced by Goliath, each individual was actually owned by the corporation. A less-than-generous "buyback" scheme to enable one to purchase oneself hadn't been well received.

We parked a little way down from the Nation and got out of the car.

"Can't we just park inside?" asked Bowden.

"They don't like cars," I explained. "They don't see the point in traveling any distance. According to neanderthal logic, anywhere that can't be reached in a day's walk isn't worth visiting. Our neanderthal gardener used to walk the four miles to our house every Tuesday and then walk back again, resisting all offers of a lift. Walking was, he maintained, 'the only decent way to travel--if you drive, you miss the conversations in the hedgerows.' "

"I can see his point," replied Bowden, "but when I need to be somewhere in a hurry--"

"That's the difference, Bowd. You've got to get off the human way of thinking. To neanderthals nothing is so urgent that it can't be done another time--or not done at all. By the way, did you remember not to wash this morning?"

He nodded. Because scent is so important to neanderthal communications, the soapy cleanliness of humans reads more like some form of suspicious subterfuge. Speak to a neanderthal while wearing scent and he'll instantly think you have something to hide.

We walked into the grassy entrance of the Nation and encountered a lone neanderthal sitting on a chair in the middle of the path. He was reading the large-print *Neanderthal News*. He folded up the paper and sniffed the air delicately before staring at us for a moment or two and then asking, "Whom do you wish to visit?"

"Next and Cable, lunch with Mr. Stiggins."

The neanderthal stared at us for moment or two, then pointed us towards a house on the other side of a grassed open area that surrounded a totem representing I-don't-know-what. There were five or six neanderthals playing a game of street croquet on the grass area, and I watched them intently for a while. They weren't playing in teams, just passing the ball around and hooping where possible. They were excellent, too. I watched one player hoop from at least forty yards away off a roquet. It was a pity neanderthals were aggressively noncompetitive--I could have done with them on the team.

"Notice anything?" I asked as we walked across the grassed area, the croquet players moving past us in a blur of well-coordinated limbs.

"No children?"

"The youngest neanderthal is fifty-two," I explained. "The males are infertile. It's probably their biggest source of disagreement with their owners."

"I'd be pissed off, too."

We found Stiggins's house, and I opened the door and walked straight in. I knew a bit about neanderthal customs, and you would never go into a neanderthal home unless you were expected--in which case you treated it as your own and walked in unannounced. The house was built entirely of scrap wood or recycled rubbish and was circular in shape, with a central hearth. It was comfortable and warm and cozy, but not the sort of basic cave I think Bowden expected. There was a TV and proper sofas, chairs and even a hi-fi. Standing next to the fire was Stiggins, and next to him was a slightly smaller

neanderthal.

"Welcome!" said Stig. "This is Felicity--we are a partnership."

His wife walked silently up to us and hugged us both in turn, taking an opportunity to smell us, first in the armpit and then in the hair. I saw Bowden flinch, and Stig gave a small, grunty cough that was a neanderthal laugh.

"Mr. Cable, you are uncomfortable," observed Stig.

Bowden shrugged. He *was* uncomfortable, and he knew neanderthals well enough to know that you can't lie to them.

"I am," he replied. "I've never been in a neanderthal house before."

"Is it any different to yours?"

"Very," said Bowden, looking up at the construction of the roof beams, which had been made by gluing oddments of wood together and then planing them into shape.

"Not a single wood screw or bolt, Mr. Cable. Have you heard the noise wood makes when you turn a screw into it? Most uncharitable."

"Is there anything you don't make yourself?"

"Not really. You are insulting the raw material if you do not extract all possible use from it. Any cash we earn has to go to our buyback scheme. We may be able to afford our ownership papers by the time we are due to leave."

"Then what, if you'll excuse me, is the point?"

"To die free, Mr. Cable. Drink?"

Mrs. Stiggins appeared with four glasses that had been cut from the bottom of wine bottles and offered them to us. Stig drank his straight down, and I tried to do the same and nearly choked--it was not unlike drinking petrol. Bowden *did* choke, and clasped his throat as if it were on fire. Mr. and Mrs. Stiggins stared at us curiously, then collapsed into an odd series of grunty coughs.

"I'm not sure I see the joke," said Bowden, eyes streaming.

"It is the neanderthal custom to humiliate guests," announced Stig, taking our glasses from us. "Yours was potato gin--ours was merely water. Life is good. Have a seat."

We sat down on the sofa, and Stig poked at the embers in the fire. There was a rabbit on a stick, and I gave a deep sigh of relief it wasn't

going to be beetles for lunch.

"Those croquet players outside," I began, "do you suppose anything could induce them to play for the Swindon Mallets?"

"No. Only humans define themselves by conflict with other humans. Winning or losing has no meaning to us. Things just are as they are meant to be."

I thought about offering some money. After all, a month's salary for an averagely rated player would easily cover a thousand buyback schemes. But neanderthals are funny about money--especially money that they don't think they've earned. I kept quiet.

"Have you had any more thoughts about the cloned Shakespeares?" asked Bowden.

Stig thought for a moment, twitched his nose, turned the rabbit and then went to a large rolltop bureau and returned with a manila folder--the genome report he had got from Mr. Rumplunkett.

"Definitely clones," he said, "and whoever built them covered their tracks--the serial numbers are scrubbed from the cells, and the manufacturer's information is missing from the DNA. On a molecular level, they might have been built anywhere."

"Stig," I said, thinking of *Hamlet*, "I can't stress how important it is that I find a WillClone--and soon."

"We haven't finished, Miss Next. See this?"

He handed me a spectroscopic evaluation of Mr. Shaxtper's teeth, and I looked at the zigzag graph uncomprehendingly.

"We do this test to monitor long-term health patterns. By taking a cross-section of Shaxtper's teeth, we can trace the original manufacturing area solely from the hardness of the water."

"For what purpose?"

"We recognize this pattern," he said, jabbing a stubby finger at the chart. "In particular the high concentration of calcium just here. We can usually trace a chimera's original manufacturing area solely from the hardness of the water."

"I see," said Bowden. "So where do we find this sort of water?"

"Simple: Birmingham."

Bowden clapped his hands happily. "You mean to tell me there's a

secret bioengineering lab in the Birmingham area? We'll find it in a jiffy!"

"The lab isn't in Birmingham," said Stig.

"But you said . . . ?"

I knew exactly what he was driving at.

"Birmingham imports its water," I said in a low voice, "from the Elan Valley--in the *Socialist Republic of Wales*."

The job had just got that much worse. Goliath's biggest biotech facility used to be on the banks of the Craig Goch Reservoir, deep in the Elan, before they moved to the Presellis. They had built across the border due to the lax bioengineering regulations; they shut down as soon as the Welsh parliament caught up. The lab in the Presellis did only legitimate work.

"Impossible!" scoffed Bowden. "They closed down decades ago!"

"And yet," retorted Stig slowly, "your Shakespeares were built there. Mr. Cable, you are not a natural friend to the neanderthal, and you do not have the strength of spirit of Miss Next, yet you *are* impassioned."

Bowden was unconvinced by Stig's precis. "How can you know me that well?"

There was a silence for a moment as Stig turned the rabbit on the spit.

"You live with a woman whom you don't truly love, but need for stability. You are suspicious that she is seeing someone else, and that anger and suspicion hangs heavily on your shoulders. You feel passed over for promotion, and the one woman whom you truly love is inaccessible to you--"

"All right, all right," he said sullenly, "I get the picture."

"You humans radiate emotions like a roaring fire, Mr. Cable. We are astounded how you are able to deceive each other so easily. We see all deception, so have evolved to have no need for it."

"These labs," I began, eager to change the subject, "you are sure?"

"We are sure," affirmed Stig, "and not only Shakespeares were built there. All neanderthals up to Version 2.3.5, too. We wish to return. We have an urgent wish for that which we have been denied."

"And that is?" asked Bowden.

"Children," breathed Stig. "We have planned for just such an expedition, and your *sapien* characteristics will be useful. You have an impetuosity that we can never have. A neanderthal considers each move before taking it and is genetically predisposed towards caution. We need someone like you, Miss Next--a human with drive, a propensity towards violence and the ability to take command--yet someone governed by what is *right*."

I sighed. "We're not going to get into the Socialist Republic," I said. "We have no jurisdiction, and if we're caught, there will be hell to pay."

"What about your plan to take all those books across, Thursday?" asked Bowden in a quiet voice.

"There is no plan, Bowd. I'm sorry. And I can't risk being banged up in some Welsh slammer during the SuperHoop. I *have* to make sure the Mallets win. I *have* to be there."

Stig frowned at me. "Strange!" he said at last. "You do not want to win for a deluded sense of hometown pride--we see a greater purpose."

"I can't tell you, Stig, but what you read is true. It is vital to *all* of us that Swindon wins the SuperHoop."

Stig looked across to Mrs. Stiggins, and the two of them held a conversation for a good five minutes--using only facial expressions and the odd grunt.

After they had finished, Stig said, "It is agreed. You, Mr. Cable, and ourself will break into the abandoned Goliath reengineering labs. You to find your Shakespeares, we to find a way to seed our females."

"I can't--"

"Even if we fail," continued Stig, "the Neanderthal Nation will field five players to help you win your SuperHoop. There can be no payment and no glory. Is this the deal?"

I stared at his small brown eyes. By the quality I had seen of the players outside and my knowledge of neanderthals in general, we would be in with a chance--even with me locked up in a Welsh jail.

I shook his outstretched hand. "This is the deal."

"Then we must eat. Do you like rabbit?"

We both nodded.



"Good. This is a speciality of ours. In Neanderlese it is called *rabite'n'bitels*."

"Sounds excellent," replied Bowden. "What's it served with?"

"Potatoes and a . . . tangy, greeny-brown, crunchy sauce."

I can't be sure, but I think Stig winked at me. I needn't have worried. The meal was excellent, and neanderthals are quite correct--beetles are severely underrated.

## Planning Meeting

### Common Cormorants' Numbers Decline

A leading ornithologist claimed yesterday that bear-bird incompatibility is to blame for the cormorant decline in recent years. "We have known for many years that cormorants lay eggs in paper bags to keep the lightning out," explained Mr. Daniel Chough, "but the reintroduction of bears to England has placed an intolerable strain on the birds' breeding habits. Even though bears and birds rarely compete for food and resources, it seems that wandering bears with buns steal the cormorants' paper bags in order, according to preliminary research, to hold the crumbs." That the bears are of Danish origin is suspected but not yet substantiated.

Article in *Flap!* magazine, July 20, 1988

So what do you know about the Elan?" asked Bowden as we drove back into the town.

"Not much," I replied, looking at the charts of Mr. Shaxspoor's teeth. Stig reckoned he had lived in the Elan for a lot longer than the others--perhaps until only a few years ago. If he had survived that long, why not some of the others? I wasn't going to raise any false hopes quite yet, but at least it seemed *possible* we could save *Hamlet* after all.

"Were you serious about not being able to think of a way in?"

"I'm afraid so. We could always pretend to be water officials from Birmingham or something."

"Why would water officials have ten truckloads of banned Danish books?" asked Bowden, not unreasonably.

"Something to read while doing water-officially things?"

"If we don't get these books to safety, they'll be burned, Thursday--we've *got* to find a way into the Republic."

"I'll think of something."

I spent the rest of the afternoon fielding calls from numerous sports reporters, eager to get a story and find out who would be playing in what position on the field. I called Aubrey and told him that he would have five new players--but I didn't tell him they'd be neanderthals. I couldn't risk the press's finding out.

By the time I returned to Mum's house, my wedding ring was firmly back on my finger again. I pushed Friday around to Landen's house and, noticing that everything seemed to be back to normal, knocked twice. There was an excited scrabble from within, and Landen opened the door.

"There you are!" he said happily. "When you hung up on me, I got kinda worried."

"I didn't hang up, Land."

"I was eradicated again?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Will I be again?"

"I'm hoping not. Can I come in?"

I put Friday on the floor, and he immediately started to try to climb the stairs.

"Bedtime already, is it, young man?" asked Landen, following him as he clambered all the way up. I noticed that in the spare room there were two as-yet-unpacked stair gates, which put my mind at rest. He had bought a cot, too, and several toys.

"I bought some clothes."

He opened the drawer. It was stuffed with all kinds of clothes for the little chap, and although some looked a bit small, I didn't say anything. We took Friday downstairs, and Landen made some supper.

"So you knew I was coming back?" I asked as he cut up some broccoli.

"Oh, yes," he replied, "as soon as you got all that eradication nonsense sorted out. Make us a cup of tea, would you?"

I walked over to the sink and filled the kettle.

"Any closer to a plan for dealing with Kaine?" asked Landen.

"No," I admitted, "I'm really banking on Zvlkx's Seventh Revealment coming true."

"What I don't understand," said Landen, chopping some carrots, "is why everyone except Formby seems to agree with everything Kaine says. Bloody sheep, the lot of them."

"I must say I'm surprised by the lack of opposition to Kaine's plans," I agreed, staring absently out the kitchen window. I frowned as the germ of an idea started to ferment in my mind. "Land?"

"Yuh?"

"When was the last time Formby went anywhere near Kaine?"

"Never. He avoids him like the plague. Kaine wants to meet him face-to-face, but the President won't have anything to do with him."

"That's it!" I exclaimed, suddenly having a flash of inspiration.

"What's it?"

"Well ..."

I stopped because something at the bottom of the garden had caught my eye.

"Do you have nosy neighbors, Land?"

"Not really."

"It's probably my stalker, then."

"You have a stalker?"

I pointed. "Sure. Just there, in the laurels, beckoning to me."

"Do you want me to do the strong male thing and chase him off with a stick?"

"No. I've got a better idea."

"Hello, Millon. How's the stalking going? I brought you a cup of tea and a bun."

"Pretty well," he said, marking down in his notebook the time I had

stopped to talk to him and budging aside to make room for me in the laurel bush. "How are things with you?"

"They're mostly good. What were you waving at me for?"

"Ah!" he said. "We were going to run a feature about thirteenth-century seers in *Conspiracy Theorist* magazine, and I wanted to ask you a few questions."

"Go ahead."

"Do you think it's odd that no fewer than twenty-eight Dark Ages saints have chosen this year for their second coming?"

"I'd not really given it that much thought."

"O-kay. Do you not also find it strange that of these twenty-eight supposed seers, only two of them--St. Zvlkx and Sister Bettina of Stroud--have actually made any prophecies that have come remotely true?"

"What are you saying?"

"That St. Zvlkx might not be a thirteenth-century saint at all, but some sort of time-traveling criminal. He takes an illicit journey to the Dark Ages, writes up what he can remember of history and then, at the appropriate time, he is catapulted forward to see his last revelation come true."

"Why?" I asked. "If the ChronoGuard gets wind of what he's up to, he's never been born--literally. Why risk nonexistence for at most a few years' fame as a washed-up visitor from the thirteenth century with a host of unpleasant skin complaints?"

Millon shrugged. "I don't know. I thought you might be able to help *me*." He lapsed into silence.

"Tell me, Millon--is there any connection between Kaine and the Ovinator?"

"Of course! You should read *Conspiracy Theorist* magazine more often. Although most of our links between secret technology and those in power are about as tenuous as mist, this one really is concrete: his personal assistant, Stricknene, used to work with Schitt-Hawse at the Goliath tech division. If Goliath has an Ovinator, then Kaine might very well have one, too. Do you know what it does, then?"

I laughed. This was *exactly* the news I wanted to hear.

"You'll see. Tell me," I added, my hopes rising by the second, "what

do you know about the old Goliath BioEngineering labs?"

"Hoooh!" he said, making a noise like any enthusiast invited to comment on his particular field of interest. "Now you're talking! The old Goliath BioE is still standing in what we call Area 21--the empty quarter in Mid-Wales, the Elan."

"Empty metaphorically or empty literally?"

"Empty as in no one goes there except water officials--and we have wholly uncorroborated evidence that we peddle as fact that an unspecified number of officials have vanished without a trace. In any event, it's all off-limits to everyone, surrounded by an electrified fence."

"To keep people out?"

"No," said Millon slowly, "to keep whatever genetic experiments Goliath was working on *in*. The whole of Area 21 is infested with chimeras. I've got files and files of dubious stories about people breaking in, allegedly never to be seen again. What's your interest in the Elan BioE plant anyway?"

"Illegal genetic experiments on humans undertaken covertly by an apparently innocent multinational."

Millon nearly passed out with the conspiracy overload. When he had recovered, he asked how he could help.

"I need you to find any pictures, plans, layout drawings--anything that might be of use for a visit."

Millon opened his eyes wide and scribbled in his notepad. "You're going to go into Area 21?"

"No," I replied, "we both are. Tomorrow. Leaving here at seven in the morning, *sharp*. Can you find what I asked for?"

He narrowed his eyes. "I can get you your information, Miss Next," he said slowly and with a gleam in his eye, "but it will cost. Let me be your official biographer."

I put out a hand and he shook it gratefully. "Deal."

I walked back inside to find Landen talking to a man dressed in slightly punky clothes, with brightly colored spectacle frames, bleached-blond hair and an infinitesimally small goatee firmly planted just under his lower lip.

"Darling," Landen said, grasping the hand that I had just rested on

his shoulder, "this is my very good friend Handley Paige."

I shook Paige's hand. He seemed pretty much the same as any other SF writers I had ever met. Slightly geeky, but pleasant enough.

"You write the Emperor Zhark books," I observed.

He winced slightly. "No one ever talks about the decent stuff I write," he moaned. "They just ask me for more and more Zhark stuff. I did it as a joke--a pastiche of bad science fiction--and blow me down if it isn't the most popular thing I've ever done."

I remembered what Emperor Zhark had told me. "You're going to kill him off, aren't you?"

Handley started. "How did you know that?"

"She works for SO-27," explained Landen. "They know *everything*."

"I thought you guys were more hooked on the classics?"

"We deal with all genres," I explained. "For reasons that I can't reveal, I advise you to maroon Zhark on an uninhabited planet rather than expose him to the humiliation of a public execution."

Handley laughed. "You talk about him as if he were a real person!"

"She takes her work very seriously, Handley," said Landen without the glimmer of a smile. "I'd advise you to consider very seriously anything she happens to say. Wheels within wheels, Handley."

But Handley was adamant. "I'm going to kill him off so utterly and completely that no one will ever ask me for another Zhark novel again. Thanks for lending me the book, Land. I'll see myself out."

"Is Handley in danger?" asked Landen as soon as he had gone.

"Quite possibly. I'm not sure the Zharkian death-ray works in the real world, and I'd hate for Handley to be the one who finds out."

"This is a BookWorld thing, isn't it? Let's just change the subject. What did your stalker want?"

I smiled. "You know, Landen, things are beginning to look up. I must call Bowden."

I quickly dialed his number.

"Bowd? It's Thursday. I've figured out how we're going to get across the border. Set everything up for tomorrow morning. We'll muster at Leigh Delamare at eight. . . . I can't tell you. . . . Stig and Millon. . . .

See you there. Bye."

I called Stig and told him the same, then kissed Landen and asked him if he'd mind feeding Friday on his own. He didn't, of course, and I dashed off to speak to Mycroft.

I was back in time to help Landen scrub the food off Friday, read the boy a story and put him to bed. It wasn't late, but we went to bed ourselves. Tonight there was no shyness or confusion, and we undressed quickly. He pushed me backwards onto the bed and with his fingertips--

"Wait!" I cried out.

"What?"

"I can't concentrate with all those people!"

Landen looked around the empty bedroom. "What people?"

"Those people," I repeated, waving a hand in the general direction of everywhere, "the ones *reading* us."

Landen stared at me and raised an eyebrow. I felt stupid, then relaxed and gave out a nervous giggle.

"Sorry. I've been living inside fiction for too long; sometimes I get this weird feeling that you, me and everything else are just . . . well, characters in a book or something."

"Plainly, that is ridiculous."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. Where were we?"

"Just here."



## Area 21: The Elan

### Freedom of Act a Step Closer, Announces Mr.

Open government came one step closer yesterday with the announcement that Mr. would lend his weight to the Freedom of Act. The act, which aims to bring once top- information from into the hands of the, was hailed as a "great leap forward" by Mr., the Department of 's senior. The chief opponent to the draft bill, Mr., gave his assurance that "as long as my name is, I won't allow this to be passed."

Article in *The*, July, 19

So what's the plan?" asked Bowden as we drove towards the Welsh border town of Hay-on-Wye. It was about ten in the morning, and we were traveling in Bowden's Welsh-built Griffin Sportina with Millon de Floss and Stig in the backseat. Behind us was a convoy of ten lorries, all loaded with banned Danish books.

"Well," I said, "ever thought it odd that parliament just rolls over and does anything that Kaine asks?"

"I've given up with even *trying* to understand parliament," said Bowden.

"They're all sniveling toadies," put in Millon.

"If you even *need* a government," added Stig, "you are a life-form flawed beyond redemption."

"I was confused, too," I continued. "A government wholly agreeable to the worst excesses of Kaine could mean only one thing: some form of short-range mind control wielded by unscrupulous power brokers."

"Now, that's *my* kind of theory!" exclaimed Millon excitedly.

"I couldn't figure it out at first, but then when I was up at Goliathopolis, I felt it myself. A sort of mind-numbing go-with-the-

flow feeling, where I just wanted to follow the path of least resistance, no matter how pointless or wrong. I had seen its effect at the *Evade the Question* TV show, too--the front row was eating out of Kaine's hand, no matter what he said."

"So what's the connection?"

"I felt it again in Mycroft's lab. It was only when Landen made a sarcastic comment that it twigged. The Ovinator. We all thought the 'ovi' part of it was to do with eggs, but it's not. Think 'ovine.' It's to do with *sheep*. The Ovinator transmits subalpha brain waves that inhibit free will and instill sheeplike tendencies into the minds of anyone close by. It can be tuned to the user so he is unaffected; it's possible that Goliath might have developed a long-range version called the Ovitron and an antiserum. Mycroft thinks he probably invented it to transmit public health messages, but he can't remember. Goliath gets hold of it, Stricknene gives it to Kaine--bingo. Parliament does everything Kaine asks. The only reason Formby is still anti-Yorrick is because he refuses to go anywhere near him."

There was silence in the car.

"What can we do about it?"

"Mycroft's working on an Ovi-negator that should cancel it out, but our plans carry on as before. The Elan--and win the SuperHoop."

"Even I'm finding this hard to believe," murmured Millon, "and that's a first for me."

"How does it get us out of England?" asked Bowden.

I patted the briefcase that was sitting on my lap. "With the Ovinator on our side, no one will want to oppose us."

"I'm not sure that's morally acceptable," said Bowden. "I mean, doesn't that make us as bad as Kaine?"

"I think we should stop and talk this through," added Millon. "It's one thing making up stories about mind-control experiments but quite another actually *using* them."

I opened the briefcase and switched the Ovinator on.

"Who's with me to go to the Elan, guys?"

"Well, all right then," conceded Bowden, "I guess I'm with you on this."

"Millon?"

"I'll do whatever Bowden does."

"It really does work, doesn't it?" observed Stig, giving a short, snorty cough. I chuckled slightly myself, too.

Getting through the English checkpoint at Clifford was even easier than I had imagined. I went ahead with the Ovinator in my briefcase and stood for some time at the border station, chatting to the duty guard and giving him and the small garrison a good soaking with Ovinator rays for half an hour before Bowden drove up with the ten trucks behind him.

"What's in those trucks?" asked the guard with a certain degree of torpidity in his voice.

"You don't need to look in the trucks," I told him.

"We don't need to look in the trucks," echoed the border guard.

"We can go through unimpeded."

"You can go through unimpeded."

"You're going to be nicer to your girlfriend."

"I'm *definitely* going to be nicer to my girlfriend. . . . Move along."

He waved us through, and we drove across the demilitarized zone to the Welsh border guards who called their colonel as soon as we explained that we had ten truckloads of Danish books that required safekeeping. There was a long and convoluted phone call with someone from the Danish consulate, and after about an hour, we and the trucks were escorted to a disused hangar at the Llan-drindod Wells airfield park. The colonel in charge offered us free passage back to the border, but I switched on the Ovinator again and told him that he could take the truck drivers back but to let us go on our way, a plan that he quickly decided was probably the best thing.

Ten minutes later we were on the road north towards the Elan, Millon directing us all the way according to a 1950s tourist map. By the time we were past Rhayder, the countryside became more rugged and the farms less and less frequent and the road more and more potholed until, as the sun reached its zenith and started its downward track, we arrived at a tall set of gates, strung liberally with rusty barbed wire. There was an old stone-built guardhouse with two very bored guards who needed only a short burst from the Ovinator to switch off the electrified fence, allowing us to pass. Bowden drove the

car through and stopped at another internal fence twenty yards inside the first. This was unelectrified, and I pushed it open to let the car pass.

The road was in worse repair on the Area 21 side of the gates. Tussocky grass was growing from the cracks in the concrete roadway, and on occasion trees that had fallen across the road impeded our progress.

"Now can you tell me what we're doing here?" asked Millon, staring intently out the window and taking frequent photographs.

"Two reasons," I said, looking at the map that Millon had obtained from his conspiracy buddies. "First, because we think someone's been cloning Shakespeares and I need one as a matter of some urgency, and second, to find vital reproductive information for Stig."

"So it's true you can't have children?"

Stig liked Millon because he asked such direct questions.

"It is true," he replied simply, loading up his dart gun with tranqs the size of Havana cigars.

"Take a left here, Bowd."

He changed gear, pulled the wheel around, and we entered a stretch of road with dark woodland on either side. We drove up a hill, took a left-hand turn past an outcrop of rock, then stopped. There was a rusty car upside down on the road in front of us, blocking the way.

"Stay in the car, keep it running," I said to Bowden. "Millon, stay put. Stig--with me."

Stig and I climbed out of the car and cautiously approached the upturned vehicle. It was a custom-made Studebaker, probably about ten years old. I peered in. Vandals never came here. The glass in the speedometer was unbroken, the rusty keys still in the ignition, the leather from the seats hanging in rotten strands. There was a sun-bleached briefcase lying on the ground, and it was full of water-related technical stuff, now all mushy and faded by the wind and rain. Of the occupants there was no sign. I had thought Millon was overcooking it with all his "chimeras running wild" stuff, but suddenly I felt nervous.

"Miss Next!"

It was Stig. He was about ten yards ahead of the car and was squatting down, rifle across his knees. I walked slowly up to him,

looking anxiously into the deep woodland on either side of the road. It was quiet. Rather *too* quiet. The sound of my own footfalls felt deafening.

"What's up?"

He pointed to the ground. There was a human ulna lying on the road. Whoever had been in this accident, one of them never left.

"Hear that?" asked Stig.

I listened. "No."

"Exactly. No noise at all. We think it advisable to leave."

We pivoted the car on its roof to give us room to pass and drove on, this time much slower, and in silence. There were three other cars on that stretch of road, two on their sides and one pushed into the verge. None of them had the least sign of the occupants, and the woods to either side seemed somehow even darker and deeper and more impenetrable as we drove past. I was glad when we reached the top of the hill, cleared the forest and drove down past a small dam and a lake before a rise in the road brought us within sight of the old Goliath BioEngineering labs. I asked Bowden to stop. He pulled up silently, and we all got out to observe the old factory through binoculars.

It was in a glorious location, right on the edge of the reservoir. But from what we had been led to expect from Millon's hyperactive imagination and a tatty photograph taken in its heyday, it was something of a disappointment. The plant had once been a vast, sprawling complex, built in the art deco style popular for factories in the thirties, but now it looked as though a hurried and not entirely successful effort had been made to demolish it a long time ago. Although much of the building had been destroyed or collapsed, the east wing looked as though it had survived relatively unscathed. Even so, it didn't appear that anyone had been there for years, if not decades.

"What was that?" said Millon.

"What was what?"

"A sort of *yummy* noise."

"Hopefully just the wind. Let's have a closer look at the plant." We motored down the hill and parked in front of the building. The front facade was still imposing, though half collapsed, and even retained much of the ceramic tile exterior and decoration. Clearly Goliath had

great things planned for this place. We picked our way amongst the rubble that lay strewn across the steps and approached the main doors. They had both been pushed off their hinges, and one of them had large gouge marks, something that Millon was most interested in. I stepped inside. Broken furniture and fallen masonry lay everywhere in the oval lobby. The once fine suspended glass ceiling had long since collapsed, bringing natural light to an otherwise gloomy interior. The glass squeaked and cracked as we stepped across it.

"Where are the main labs?" I asked, not wanting to be here a minute longer than I had to.

Millon unfolded a blueprint.

"Where do you get all this stuff?" asked Bowden incredulously.

"I swapped it for a Cairngorm yeti's foot," he replied, as though talking about bubble-gum cards. "It's this way."

We walked through the building, amongst more fallen masonry and partially collapsed ceilings towards the relatively undamaged east wing. The roof was more intact here, and our torches flicked into offices and incubating rooms where rows upon rows of abandoned glass amniojars were lined up against the wall. In many of them, the liquefied remnant of a potential life-form had pooled in the bottom. Goliath had left in a hurry.

"What was this place?" I asked, my voice barely louder than a whisper.

"This was," muttered Millon, consulting his blueprint, "the main saber-toothed tiger manufacturing facility. The neanderthal wing should be through there and the first on the left."

The door was locked and bolted, but it was dry and rotten, and it didn't take much to force it open. There were papers scattered everywhere, and a halfhearted attempt had been made to destroy them. We stopped at the doorway and let Stiggins walk in alone. The room was about a hundred feet long and thirty feet wide. It was similar to the tiger facility next door, but the amniojars were larger. The glass nutrient pipes were still in evidence, and I shivered. To me the room was undeniably creepy, but to Stig it was his first home. He, along with many thousands of his fellow extinctees, had been grown here. I had sequenced Pickwick at home using nothing more complex than average kitchen utensils and cultivated her in a denucleated goose egg. Birds and reptiles were one thing, umbilical cultivation of mammals quite another. Stig trod carefully amongst the twisted pipes

and broken glass to a far door and found the decanting room, where the infant neanderthals were taken out of their amniojars and breathed for the first time. Beyond this the nursery, where the young had been brought up. We followed Stig through, and he stood at the large window that overlooked the reservoir.

"When we dream, it is of this," he said quietly. Then, obviously feeling that he was wasting time, he strode back to the incubating room and started rummaging in filing cabinets and desk drawers. I told him we'd meet him outside and rejoined Millon, who was trying to make sense of his floor plan.

After walking in silence through several more rooms with even more ranks of amniojars, we arrived at a steel-gated secure area. The gate was open, and we stepped through, entering what had once been the most secret area of the entire plant.

A dozen or more paces farther on, the corridor led into a large hall, and we knew we had found what we had been looking for. Built within the large room was a full-scale copy of the Globe Theatre. The stage and groundling area were strewn with torn-out pages of Shakespeare's plays, heavily annotated in black ink. In a room leading off, we found a dormitory that might have contained two hundred beds. All the bedding was upended in a corner, the bedsteads broken and lying askew.

"How many do you think went through here?" asked Bowden in a whisper.

"Hundreds and hundreds," replied Millon, holding up a battered copy of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* with the name "Shaxpreke, W, 769" written on the inside front cover. He shook his head sadly.

"What happened to them all?"

"Dead," said a voice, "dead as a ducat!"

## Shakespeare

### "All the World's a Stage," Claims Playwright

That was the analogy of life offered by Mr. William Shakespeare yesterday when his latest play opened at the Globe. Mr. Shakespeare went on to further compare plays with the seven stages of life by declaring "all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts." Mr. Shakespeare's latest offering, a comedy entitled *As You Like It*, opened to mixed reviews with the *fouth-wark Gazette* calling it "a rollicking comedy of the highest order," while the *Westminster Evening News* described it as "tawdry rubbish from the Warwickshire shithouse." Mr. Shakespeare declined to comment, as he is already penning a follow-up.

Article in *Blackfriars News*, September 1589

We turned to find a small man with wild, unkempt hair standing at the doorway. He was dressed in Elizabethan clothes that had seen far better days, and his feet were bound with strips of cloth as makeshift shoes. He twitched nervously, and one eye was closed--but beyond this the similarity to the Shakespeares Bowden had found was unmistakable. A survivor. I took a step closer. His face was lined and weathered, and those teeth he still possessed were stained dark brown and worn. He must have been at least seventy, but it didn't matter. The genius that had been Shakespeare had died in 1616, but genetically speaking, he was with us right now.

"William Shakespeare?"

"I *am* a William, sir, and my name is Shakespeare," he corrected.

"Mr. Shakespeare," I began again, unsure of how to explain exactly what I wanted, "my name is Thursday Next, and I have a Danish prince urgently in need of your help."



He looked from me to Bowden to Millon and back to me again. Then a smile broke across his weathered features.

"O wonder!" he said at last. "How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world that has such people in't!"

He stepped forward and shook our hands warmly; it didn't look as though he had seen anyone for a while.

"What happened to the others, Mr. Shgakespeafe?"

He beckoned us to follow him and then was off like a gazelle. We had a hard job keeping up with him as he darted down the labyrinthine corridors, nimbly avoiding the rubbish and broken equipment. We caught up with him when he stopped at a smashed window that overlooked what had once been a large exercise compound. In the middle were two grassy mounds. It didn't take a huge amount of imagination to guess what was underneath them.

"O heart, heavy heart, why sigh'st thou without breaking?" murmured Shgakespeafe sorrowfully. "After the slaughter of so many peers by falsehood and by treachery, when will our great regenitors be conquered?"

"I only wish I could say your brothers would be avenged," I told him sadly, "but in all honesty, the men who did this are now dead themselves. I can only offer yourself and those who survive my protection."

He took in every word carefully and seemed impressed by my candor. I looked beyond the mass graves of the Shakespeares to several other mounds beyond. I had thought they might have cloned two dozen or so, not hundreds.

"Are there any other Shakespeares here?" asked Bowden.

"Only myself--yet the night echoes with the cries of my *cousins*," replied Shgakespeafe. "You will hear them anon."

As if in answer, there was a strange cry from the hills. We had heard something like it when Stig dispatched the chimera back in Swindon.

"We are not safe, Clarence, we are not safe," he said, looking around nervously. "Follow me and give me audience, friends."

Shgakespeafe led us along the corridor and into a room that was full of desks set neatly in rows, each with a typewriter upon it. Only one typewriter was anything like still functioning; around it stood stacks and stacks of typewritten sheets of paper--the product of

Shakespeare's outpourings. He led us across and gave us some of his work to read, looking on expectantly as our eyes scanned the writing. It was, disappointingly, nothing special at all--merely scraps of existing plays cobbled together to give new meaning. I tried to imagine the whole room full of Shakespeare clones clattering away at their typewriters, their minds filled with the Bard's plays, and scientists moving amongst them trying to find one, just *one*, who had even one half the talent of the original.

Shakespeare beckoned us to the office next to the writing room, and there he showed us mounds and mounds of paperwork, all packaged in brown paper with the name of the Shakespeare clone who had written it printed on a label. As the production of writing outstripped the ability to evaluate it, the people working here could only file what had been written and then store it for some unknown employee in the future to peruse. I looked again at the piles of paperwork. There must have been twenty tons or more in the storeroom. There was a hole in the roof, and the rain had got in; much of this small mountain of prose was damp, moldy and unstable.

"It would take an age to sort through it for anything of potential brilliance," mused Bowden, who had arrived by my side. Perhaps, ultimately, the experiment had succeeded. Perhaps there *was* an equal of Shakespeare buried in the mass grave outside, his work somewhere deep within the mountain of unintelligible prose facing us. It was unlikely we would ever know, and if we did, it would teach us nothing new--except that it could be done and others might try. I hoped the mound of paperwork would just slowly rot. In the pursuit of great art, Goliath had perpetrated a crime that far outstripped anything I had so far seen.

Millon took pictures, his flashgun going off in the dim interior of the scriptorium. I shivered and decided I needed to get away from the oppressiveness of the interior. Bowden and I walked to the front of the building and sat amongst the rubble on the front steps, just next to a fallen statue of Socrates that held a banner proclaiming the value of the pursuit of knowledge.

"Do you think we'll have trouble persuading Shakespeare to come with us?" he asked.

As if in answer, Shakespeare walked cautiously from the building. He carried a battered suitcase and blinked in the harsh sunlight. Without waiting to be asked, he got into the back of the car and started to scribble in a notebook with a pencil stub.

"Does that answer your question?"

The sun dropped below the hill in front of us, and the air suddenly felt colder. Every time there was a strange noise from the hills, Shgakespeafe jumped and looked around nervously, then continued to scribble. I was just about to fetch Stig when he appeared from the building carrying three enormous leatherbound volumes.

"Did you find what you needed?"

He passed me the first book, which I opened at random. It was, I discovered, a Goliath BioTech manual for building a neanderthal. The page I had selected gave a detailed description of the neanderthal hand.

"A complete manual," he said slowly. "With it we can make children."

I handed back the volume, and he placed it with the others in the boot of the car just as there was another unearthly wail in the distance.

"A deadly groan," muttered Shgakespeafe, sitting lower in his seat, "like life and death's departing!"

"We had better get going," I said. "There is something out there, and I've a feeling we should leave before it gets too inquisitive."

"Chimera?" asked Bowden. "To be honest, we've seen the grand total of none from the moment we came in here."

"We do not see them because they do not wish to be seen," observed Stig. "There is chimera here. *Dangerous* chimera."

"Thanks, Stig," said Millon, dabbing his brow with a handkerchief, "that's a real help."

"It is the truth, Mr. de Floss."

"Well, keep the truth to yourself in future."

I shut the rear door as soon as Stig had wedged himself in next to Shgakespeafe, and then I climbed into the front passenger seat. Bowden drove off as rapidly as the car would allow.

"Millon, is there any other route out that doesn't take us through that heavily wooded area where we found the other cars?"

He consulted the map for a moment. "No. Why?"

"Because it looked like a good place for an ambush."

"This really gets better and better, doesn't it?"

"On the contrary," replied Stig, who took all speech on face value, "this is not good at all. We find the prospect of being eaten by chimeras extremely awkward."

"Awkward?" echoed Millon. "Being eaten is *awkward*?"

"Indeed," said Stig, "the neanderthal instruction manuals are far more important than we."

"That's *your* opinion," retorted Millon. "Right now there is nothing more important than me."

"How very *human*," replied Stig simply.

We sped up the road, drove back through the rock cutting and headed towards the wood.

"By the pricking of my thumbs," remarked Shgakespeare in an ominous tone of voice, "something wicked this way comes!"

"There!" yelled Millon, pointing a quivering finger out the window. I caught a glimpse of a large beast before it vanished behind a fallen oak, then another jumping from one tree to another. They didn't hide themselves anymore. We could all see them as we drove down the wooded road, past the abandoned cars. Lolloping beasts of a ragged shape flitted through the woods, experimental creations of an industry before regulation. We heard a thump as one leapt out of the woods, sprung upon the steel roof of the car and then disappeared with a whoop into the forest. I looked out of the rear window and saw something unspeakably nasty scabble across the road behind us. I drew my automatic, and Stig wound down the window to have his tranquilizer gun at the ready. We rounded the next corner, and Bowden stomped on the brakes. A row of chimeras had placed themselves across the road. Bowden threw the car into reverse, but a tree came crashing down behind us, cutting off our escape. We had driven into the trap, the trap was sprung--and all that remained was for the *trappers* to do with the *trapped* whatever they wished.

"How many?" I asked.

"Ten up front," said Bowden.

"Two dozen behind," answered Stig.

"Lots either side!" quivered Millon, who was more used to making up facts to fit his bizarre conspiracy theories than actually witnessing any firsthand.

"What a sign it is of evil life," murmured Shgakespeafe. "Where death's approach is seen so terrible!"

"Okay," I muttered, "everyone stay calm, and when I say, open fire."

"We will not survive," said Stig in a matter-of-fact tone. "Too many of them, not enough of us. We suggest a different strategy."

"And that is?"

Stig was momentarily lost for words. "We do not know. Just *different*."

The chimeras slavered and emitted low moans as they moved closer. Each one was a kaleidoscope of varying body parts, as though the beasts' creators had been indulging in some sort of perverse genetic mix-and-match one-upmanship.

"When I count to three, rev up and drop the clutch," I instructed Bowden. "The rest of you open up with everything we've got." I handed Bowden's gun to Floss. "Know how to use one of these?"

He nodded and flipped off the safety.

"One . . . two . . ."

I stopped counting because a cry from the woods had startled the chimeras. Those that had ears pricked them up, paused, then began to depart in fright. It wasn't an occasion for relief. Chimeras are bad, but something that frightened chimeras could only be worse. We heard the cry again.

"It sounds human," murmured Bowden.

"*How* human?" added Millon.

There followed several more cries from more than one individual, and as the last of the terrified chimeras vanished into the brush, I breathed a sigh of relief. A group of men appeared out of the undergrowth to our right. They were all extremely short and wore the faded and tattered uniform of what appeared to be the French army. Some wore shabby cockaded hats, others had no jackets at all, and some wore only a dirty white linen shirt. My relief was short-lived. They stood at the edge of the forest and regarded us suspiciously, heavy cudgels in their hands.

"*Qu'est-ce que c'est?*" said one, pointing at us.

"*Anglais?*" said another.

"*Les rosbifs? Ici, en France?*" said a third in a shocked tone.

"*Non, ce n'est pas possible!*"

It didn't take a genius to figure out who they were.

"A gang of *Napoleons*," hissed Bowden. "Looks like Goliath wasn't just trying to eternalize the Bard. The military potential of cloning a Napoleon in his prime would be considerable."

The Napoleons stared at us for a moment and then talked amongst themselves in low tones, had an argument, gesticulated wildly, raised their voices and generally disagreed with one another.

"Let's go," I whispered to Bowden.

But as soon as the car clunked into gear, the Napoleons leapt into action with cries of "*Au secours! Les rosbifs s'echappent! N'oubliez pas Agincourt! Vite! Vite!*" and then rushed the car. Stig got off a shot and managed to tranq a particularly vicious-looking Napoleon in the thigh. They smashed their cudgels against the car, broke the windows and sent a cascade of broken glass all over us. I thumped the central door-locking mechanism with my elbow as a Napoleon grappled with my door handle. I was just about to fire at point-blank range into the face of another Napoleon when there was a tremendous explosion thirty yards in front. The car was rocked by the blast and enveloped momentarily in a drifting cloud of smoke.

"*Sacre bleu!*" shrieked a Napoleon, breaking off the attack. "*Le Grand Nez! Avancez, mes amis! Mort aux ennemis de la Republique!*"

"Go!" I shouted to Bowden, who, despite having been struck a glancing blow by a Napoleon, was still just about conscious. The car juddered away, and I grabbed the steering wheel to avoid a band of twenty or so Wellingtons of varying shabbiness who were streaming past the car in their haste to dispose of Napoleons.

"Up, guards, and at them!" I heard a Wellington shout as we gathered speed down the road, past a smoking artillery piece and the abandoned cars we had seen on the way in. Within a few minutes, we were clear of the wood and the battling factions, and Bowden slowed down.

"Everyone okay?"

Although not unscathed, they all answered in the affirmative. Millon was still ashen, and I took Bowden's gun off him just in case. Stig had a bruise coming up on his cheek, and I had several cuts on my face from the glass.

"Mr. Shgakespeafe," I asked, "are you okay?"

"Look about you," he said grimly. "Security gives way to conspiracy."

We drove to the gates, out of Area 21 and through the darkening evening sky to the Welsh border and home.

## St. Zvlkx and Cindy

### Kaine "Fictional," Claims Bournemouth Man

Retired gas-fitter Mr. Martin Piffco made the ludicrous comment yesterday, claiming that the beloved leader of the nation was simply a fictional character "come to life." Speaking from the Bournemouth Home for the Exceedingly Odd where he has been committed "for his own protection," Mr. Piffco was more specific and likened Mr. Yorrick Kaine to a minor character with an over-inflated opinion of himself in a Daphne Farquitt book entitled *At Long Last Lust*. The Chancellor's office dubbed the report "a coincidence," but ordered the Farquitt book be confiscated nonetheless. Mr. Piffco, who faces unspecified charges, made news last year when he made a similar outrageous claim regarding Kaine and Goliath investing in "mind-control experiments."

Article in the *Bournemouth Bugle*, March 15, 1987

I awoke and gazed at Landen in the early-morning light that had started to creep around the bedroom. He was snoring ever so softly, and I gave him a long hug before I got up, wrapped myself in a dressing gown and tiptoed past Friday's room on my way downstairs to make some coffee. I walked into Landen's study as I waited for the kettle to boil, sat down at the piano and played a very quiet chord. The sun crept above the roof of the house across the way at that precise moment and cast a finger of orange light across the room. I heard the kettle click off and returned to the kitchen to make the coffee. As I poured the hot water on the grounds, there was a small wail from upstairs. I paused to see if another would follow it. A single wail might be only a stirring, and Friday could be left alone. Two wails or more would be Hungry Boy, eager for a gallon or two of porridge. There was a second wail ten seconds later, and I was just about to go and get him when I heard a thump and a scraping as



Landen pulled on his leg and then walked along the corridor to Friday's room. There were more footsteps as he returned to his room, then silence. I relaxed, took a sip of coffee and sat at the kitchen table, deep in thought.

The SuperHoop was tomorrow and I had my team--the question was, would it make a difference? There was a chance we might find a copy of *At Long Last Lust*, too--but I wasn't counting on this, either. Of equal chance and equal risk of failure was Shgakespeare's being able to unravel *The Merry Wives of Elsinore*, and Mycroft's coming up with an Ovi-negator at short notice. But none of these pressing matters was foremost in my mind: most important to me was that at eleven o'clock this morning Cindy would try to kill me for the third and final time. She would fail, and she would die. I thought of Spike and Betty and picked up the phone. I figured he'd be a heavy sleeper, and I was right--Cindy answered the phone.

"It's Thursday."

"This is professionally very unethical," said Cindy in a sleepy voice. "What's the time?"

"Half six. Listen, I rang to suggest that it'd be a good idea if you stayed at home today and didn't go to work."

There was a pause. "I can't do that," she said at last. "I've arranged child care and everything. But there's nothing to stop you getting out of town and never returning."

"This is my town, too, Cindy."

"Leave now, or the Next family crypt will be up for a dusting."

"I won't do that."

"Then," replied Cindy with a sigh, "we've got nothing else to discuss. I'll see you later--although I doubt you'll see me."

The phone went dead, and I gently replaced the receiver. I felt sick. The wife of a good friend would die, and it didn't feel good.

"What's the matter?" said a voice close at hand. "You seem upset."

It was Mrs. Tiggy-winkle.

"No," I replied, "everything's just as it should be. Thanks for dropping round; I've found us a William Shakespeare. He's not the original, but close enough for our purposes. He's in this cupboard."

I opened the cupboard door, and a very startled Shgakespeare

looked up from where he'd been scribbling by the light of a candle and he had stuck upon his head. The wax had begun to run down his face, but he didn't seem to mind.

"Mr. Shgakespeafe, this is the hedgehog I was telling you about."

He shut his notebook and stared at Mrs. Tiggy-winkle. He wasn't the slightest bit afraid or surprised--after the abominations he'd dodged on an almost daily basis in Area 21, I suspect a six-foot-high hedgehog was something of a relief.

Mrs. Tiggy-winkle curtsied gracefully. "Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Shgakespeafe," she said politely. "Will you come with me, please?"

"Who was that?" Landen called out as he walked downstairs a little later.

"It was Mrs. Tiggy-winkle picking up a William Shakespeare clone in order to save *Hamlet* from permanent destruction."

"You can't ever be serious, can you?" he laughed as he gave me a hug. I had smuggled Shgakespeafe into the house without Landen's seeing. I know you're meant to be honest and truthful to your spouse, but I thought there might be a limit, and if there was, I didn't want to reach it too soon.

Friday came down to breakfast ten minutes later. He looked tousled, sleepy and a bit grumpy.

"Quis nostrud laboris," he moaned. "Nisi ut aliquip ex consequat."

I gave him some toast and rummaged in the cupboard under the stairs for my bulletproof vest. All my stuff was now back in Landen's house as if I had never moved out. Sideslips are confusing, but you can get used to almost anything.

"Why are you wearing a bulletproof vest?"

It was Landen. Drat. I should have put it on at the station.

"What bulletproof vest?"

"The one you're trying to put on."

"Oh, *that* one. No reason. Listen, if Friday gets hungry you can always give him a snack. He likes bananas--you may have to buy some more, and if a gorilla calls, it's only that Mrs. Bradshaw I was telling

you about."

"Don't change the subject. How can you go to work wearing a vest for 'no reason'?"

"It's a precaution."

"Insurance is a precaution. A vest means you're taking unnecessary risks."

"I'd be taking a bigger one without it."

"What's going on, Thursday?"

I waved a hand vaguely in the air and tried to make light of it. "Just an assassin. A small one. Barely worth thinking about."

"Which one?"

"I can't remember. Window . . . *something*."

"The Windowmaker? A contract with her and stick to reading short stories? Sixty-seven known victims?"

"Sixty-eight if she did Samuel Pring."

"That's not important. *Why didn't you tell me?*"

"I . . . I . . . didn't want you to worry."

He rubbed his face with his hands and stared at me for a moment, then sighed deeply. "This is the Thursday Next I married, isn't it?"

I nodded my head.

He wrapped his arms around me and held me tightly. "Will you be careful?" he whispered in my ear.

"I'm always careful."

"No, *really* careful. The sort of careful that you should be when you have a husband and son who'd be supremely pissed off if they were to lose you?"

"Ah," I whispered back, "*that* sort of careful. Yes, I will."

We kissed and I Velcroed up the vest, put my shirt over the top of it and my shoulder holster on top of this. I kissed Friday and told him to be good, then kissed Landen again.

"I'll see you this evening," I told him, "and that's a promise."

I drove to Wanborough to find Joffy. He was officiating at a GSD civil-union ceremony, and I had to wait in the back of the temple until he had finished. I had some time before I had to deal with Cindy, and looking more closely into St. Zvlkx seemed like a good way to fill it. Millon's idea that Zvlkx wasn't a seer but a rogue member of the ChronoGuard involved in some sort of timecrime seemed, on the face of it, unlikely. You couldn't hide from the ChronoGuard. They would *always* find you. Perhaps not here and now, but then and there--when you least expected it. Long before you even *thought* about doing something wrong. Plus, the ChronoGuard left no trace. With the perpetrator gone, then the timecrime never happened either. Very neat, very clever. But with the historical record so closely scrutinized and the ChronoGuard itself giving Zvlkx the seal of approval, how on earth did Zvlkx--if he *was* a fake--get around the system?

"Hello, Doofus!" said Joffy as the happy couple kissed outside the temple to a shower of confetti. "What brings you here?"

"St. Zvlkx--where is he?"

"He got the bus into Swindon this morning. Why?"

I outlined my suspicions.

"Zvlkx a rogue member of the ChronoGuard? But why? What's he up to? Why risk permanent eradication for dubious fame as a thirteenth-century seer?"

"How much did he get from the Toast Marketing Board?"

"Twenty-five grand."

"Hardly a fortune. Can we look in his room?"

"Outrageous!" replied Joffy. "I would be guilty of a shameful breach of trust if I were to allow a room search in his absence. I have a spare key here."

Zvlkx's room was much as you would suppose a monk's cell to be. Spartan in the extreme. He slept on a mattress stuffed with straw and had only a table and chair as furniture. On the table was a Bible. It was only after we started searching that we found a CD Walkman under the mattress, along with a few copies of *Big & Bouncy* and *Fast Horse*.

"A betting man?" I asked.

"Drinking, betting, smoking, wenching--he did it all."

"The magazines show he can read English, too. What are you looking for, Joff?"

Joffy had been opening the drawers of his desk and looking under the pillow.

"His Book of Revelments. He usually hides it here."

"So! You've searched his room before. Suspicious?"

Joffy looked sheepish. "I'm afraid so. His behavior is less like a saint's and more like . . . well, a cheap vulgarian's--when I translate, I have to make certain . . . *adjustments*."

I pulled out his desk drawer and turned it over. Stuck to the bottom was an envelope. "Bingo!"

It contained a single one-way Gravitube ticket all the way to Bali. Joffy raised his eyebrows, and we exchanged nervous glances. Zvlkx was definitely up to something.

Joffy accompanied me into Swindon, and we drove up and down the streets trying to find the wayward saint. We visited the site of his old cathedral at Tesco's but couldn't find him, so went on a circuit that took in the law courts, the SpecOps Building and the theater before driving past the university and down Commercial Road. Joffy spotted him outside Pete & Dave's, lumbering up the street.

"There!"

"I see him."

We abandoned the car and trotted to keep up with the scruffy figure dressed in only a blanket. It was just bad luck that he glanced furtively behind and spotted us. He darted across the street. I don't know whether his lank and uncut hair had got in his eyes or he had forgotten about traffic during his stay in the Dark Ages, but he didn't look where he was going and ran straight in front of a bus. His head cracked the windscreen, and his bony body was thrown sideways onto the pavement with a thump. Joffy and I were first on the scene. A younger man might have survived relatively unscathed, but Zvlkx, his body weakened through poor diet and disease, didn't stand much of a chance. He was coughing and crawling with all the strength he could

muster to the entrance of the nearest shop.

"Easy, Your Grace," murmured Joffy, laying a hand on his shoulder and stopping him moving. "You're going to be all right."

"Bollocks," said Zvlkx in a state of exasperation, "bollocks, bollocks, bollocks. Suruiued the plague to get hit by a sodding Number Twenty-three bus. Bollocks."

"What did he say?"

"He's annoyed."

"Who are you?" I said. "Are you ChronoGuard?"

His eyes flicked across to mine, and he groaned. Not only dying, but dying and rumbled.

He made another attempt to reach the doorway and collapsed.

"Someone call for an ambulance!" yelled out Joffy.

"It's too late for that," he muttered. "Too late for me, too late for all of us. This wasn't how it was meant to turn out; time is out of joint--and it won't be for me to set it right. Ah, well. Joffy, take this and use it wisely, as I would not haue done. Bury me in the grounds of my cathedral--and don't tell them who I was. I liued a sinner, but I'd like to die a saint. Oh, and if a fat slapper named Shirley tells you I promised her a thousand quid, she's a bloody liar."

He coughed again, shivered for a moment and stopped moving. I placed my hand on his grimy neck but could feel no pulse.

"What did he say?"

"Something about an overweight lady named Shirley, time being out of joint--and using his revealments as I see fit."

"What did he mean by that? That his revealment is *not* going to come true?"

"I don't know--but he handed me this."

It was Zvlkx's Book of Revealments. Joffy flicked through the yellowed pages, which outlined in Old English every supposed prophecy he had made, next to an arithmetic sum of some sort. Joffy closed Zvlkx's eyes and placed his jacket over the dead saint's head. A crowd had assembled, including a policeman, who took charge. Joffy hid the book, and we stood to one side as the blare of an ambulance started up in the distance. The owner of the shop had come out and

told us that having tramps dying on his doorstep was bad for business but changed his mind when he found out who it was.

"My goodness!" he said with a respectful tone. "Imagine a real live saint honoring us with his death on our doorstep!"

I nudged Joffy and pointed to the shop front. It was a betting shop.

"Typical!" snorted Joffy. "If he didn't die trying to get to the bookies, it would have been the brothel. The only reason I knew he wouldn't be at the pub is because it's not opening time."

Startled, I looked at my watch. It was 10:50. Cindy. I had been thinking about St. Zvlkx so much I had forgotten all about her. I backed into the doorway and glanced around. No sign of her, of course, but then she was the best. I thought the fact that a crowd had gathered was good, as she would be unlikely to want to kill innocent people, but then changed my mind when I realized that Cindy's creed of respect for innocent life could be written in very large letters on the back of a matchbox. I had to get away from the crowd in case someone else was hurt. I dashed off up Commercial Road and was approaching the corner with Granville Street when I stopped abruptly. Cindy had walked around the corner. My hand reflexively closed around the butt of my gun, but then I stopped, all of a sudden uncertain. She was not alone. She had Spike with her.

"Well!" said Spike, looking beyond me to the melee on the street behind. "What's going on here?"

"The death of Zvlkx, Spike."

I was staring at Cindy, who stared back at me. I could see only one of her hands. The other was hidden in her handbag. She had failed twice--how far would she go to kill me? In broad daylight, with her husband as witness? I was standing awkwardly with my hand on my automatic, but it was still in its holster. I had to trust my father. He had been right about Cindy on the previous attempt. I pulled out my gun and pointed it at her. There was a gasp from several passersby, who scattered.

"Thursday?" yelled Spike. "What the hell is going on? Put that down!"

"No, Spike. Cindy isn't a librarian, she's the Windowmaker." Spike looked at me, then at his petite wife and laughed. "Cindy, an assassin? You're joking!"

"She's delusional, and I'm frightened, Spikey," whimpered Cindy, in

her best pathetic-girly voice. "I don't know what she's talking about. I've never even held a gun!"

"Very slowly take your hand out of your handbag, Cindy."

But it was Spike who made the next move. He pulled out his gun and pointed it--at *me*.

"Put the gun down, Thurs. I've always liked you, but I have no problem making this choice."

I bit my lip but didn't stop staring at Cindy. "Ever wondered why she was paid cash to do those freelance library jobs? Why her brother works for the CIA? Why her parents were killed by police marksmen? Have you ever heard of librarians being killed by the police?"

"There's an explanation for it all, Spikey!" whined Cindy. "Kill her! She's mad!"

I saw her game now. She wasn't even going to do the job herself. In broad daylight, her husband pulls the trigger, and it's all legal: a good man defending his wife. She was good. She was the best. She was the Windowmaker. A contract with her and you're deader than corduroy.

"She has a contract out on me, Spike. Already tried to kill me on two occasions!"

"Put down the gun, Thursday!"

"Spikey, I'm frightened!"

"Cindy, I want to see both your hands!"

"*Drop the gun*, Thursday!"

We had reached an impasse. As I stood there with Spike pointing a gun at my head and with me pointing a gun at Cindy's, I realized this was quite possibly the worst situation to be in. If I lowered my gun, Cindy would kill me. If I didn't lower my gun, Spike would kill me. If I killed Cindy, Spike would kill me. Try as I might, I couldn't think of a scenario that didn't end in my own death. Tricky, to say the least. And it was then that the grand piano fell on her.

I'd never heard a piano falling thirty feet onto concrete before, but it was exactly as I imagined. A sort of musical concussion that reverberated around the street. As chance would have it, the piano--a Steinway baby, I learned later--missed us all. It was the *stool* that hit Cindy and she went down like a sack of coal. One look at her and we



both knew it was bad. A serious head wound and a badly broken neck.

It was a time of mixed emotions for Spike. Grief and shock at the accident but also realization that I had been right--still clasped in Cindy's hand was a silenced .38 revolver.

"No!" yelled Spike, placing his hand gently upon her pale cheek. "Not again!"

Cindy groaned weakly as the policeman who had been dealing with St. Zvlkx rushed up with two paramedics at his side.

"You should have told me," Spike muttered, refusing to look at me, his powerful shoulders quivering slightly as tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I'm so sorry, Spike."

He didn't reply but moved aside so the paramedics could try to stabilize her.

"Who is she?" asked the policeman. "In fact, who are you two?"

"SpecOps," we said in unison, producing our badges.

"And this is Cindy Stoker," said Spike sadly, "the assassin known as the Windowmaker--and my wife."

## What Thursday Did Next

### Kainian Government to Fund "Anti-Smite Shield"

Mr. Yorrick Kaine yesterday announced plans to set up a defensive network to counter the growing threat of God's wrath unto His creations. Specific details of the "Anti-Smite Shield" are still classed top secret, but defense experts and top theologians have both agreed that a system might be in place within five years. Kaine's followers point to the smiting of the small town of Oswestry with a "rain of cleansing fire" last October and the Rutland plague of toads. "Both Oswestry and Rutland are wake-up calls to our nation," said Mr. Kaine. "They may have been sinful, but ultimate retribution without due process of law is something that I will not tolerate. In today's modern world where the accepted definition of sin has become blurred, we need to protect ourselves against an overzealous deity keen to promote an outdated set of rules. It is for this reason that we are investing in Anti-Smite technology." The PS14 billion contract will be awarded exclusively to Goliath Weapons, Inc.

Article in *The Mole*, July 1988

The news networks had a field day. The death of St. Zvlkx so soon after his resurrection raised a few eyebrows, but the Windowmaker's somewhat bizarre accident while "on assignment" became a sensation, supplanting even the upcoming SuperHoop from the front pages. Incredibly, despite severe internal injuries and a devastating head wound, she didn't die. She was taken to St. Septyk's Hospital, where they battled to stabilize her. Not from any great sense of moral duty, you understand, but for the fact that she could finger the sixty-seven or sixty-eight clients who had paid her to carry out her foul trade, and this was a prize the prosecutors were keen to claim. Within an hour of her coming out of surgery, three attempts by underworld bosses had been made to silence her for good. She was moved to the secure ward at the Kingsdown Home for the Criminally Insane, and there she

stayed, comatose, attached to a ventilator.

"Spike was right. I should have told him earlier," I said to Gran, "or tipped off the authorities or something!"

Granny Next was feeling a lot better today. Although greatly enfeebled by her advanced years, she had actually walked around for a bit that morning. When I arrived, she had her reading glasses on and was surrounded by stacks of well-read tomes. The kind of things one generally reads for study, and rarely for pleasure.

"But you didn't," she replied, looking over the top of her spectacles, "and your father *knew* you wouldn't when he told you."

"He also said that I would decide whether she lived or died, but he was wrong--it's out of my hands now." I rubbed my scalp and sighed. "Poor Spike. He's taking it very badly."

"Where is he?"

"Still being interviewed by SO-9. They got an agent down from London who's been after her for more than ten years. I'd be there yet but for Flanker."

"Flanker?" queried Gran. "What did he do?"

"He came to thank me for leading SO-14 to a huge stockpile of hidden Danish literature."

"I thought you were trying *not* to help them?"

I shrugged.

"So did I. How was I to know the Danish underground really *was* using the Australian Writers' Guild as a depository?"

"Did you tell them it was Kaine who had paid her to kill you?"

"No," I said, looking down. "I don't know who I can trust and the last thing I need is to be taken into protective custody or something. If I'm not at the touchline tomorrow for the SuperHoop, the neanderthals won't play."

"But there is good news, surely?"

"Yes," I said, brightening somewhat, "we got some Danish books out of the country, *Hamlet* is on the mend--and I got Landen back."

Gran stared at me and lifted my face with her hand.

"For good?"

I looked down at my wedding ring.

"Twenty-four hours and counting."

"They did the same to me," sighed Gran, taking off her glasses and rubbing her eyes with a bony hand. "We were very happy for over forty years, until he was taken away again--this time in a more natural and inevitable way. And that was over thirty years ago."

She fell silent for a moment, and to distract her I told her about St. Zvlkx and his death and his revealments and how little of it made any sense. Time-traveling paradoxes tended to make my head spin.

"Sometimes," said Gran, holding up the cover of the *Swindon Evening Globe*, "the facts are all in front of us--we just have to get them in the right order."

I took the picture and stared at it. It had been taken a few seconds after the piano fell on Cindy. I hadn't realized how far the wreckage of the Steinway had scattered. A little way down the road, the lonely figure of Zvlkx was still lying on the pavement, abandoned in the drama.

"Can I keep this?"

"Of course. Be careful, my dear--remember that your father can't warn you of every single one of your potential demises. Invulnerability is reserved only for superheroes. The croquet final is far from won and anything can happen in the next twenty-four hours."

"A neanderthal defense?" repeated Aubrey and Alf when I found them taking "pegging out" at the croquet stadium. They had threatened to fire me if I didn't tell them what I was up to. "Of course, any team would spend millions trying to get a neanderthal to join--but they just won't do it."

"I've already got them. You can't pay them, and I really don't know how they will work as a team with humans--I get the feeling that they'll be a team of their own *within* your team."

"I don't care," said Aubrey, leaning on his mallet and sweeping a hand in the direction of the squad. "I was fooling myself. Biffo's too old, Smudger has a drink problem, and Snake is mentally unstable. George is okay, and I can handle myself, but a fresh crop of talent has infused the Whackers' team. They'll be fielding people like

Bonecrusher McSneed."

He wasn't kidding. A mysterious benefactor--probably Goliath--had given a vast amount of money to the Whackers. Enough for them to buy almost anyone they wanted. Goliath was taking no chances that the Seventh Revealment would be fulfilled.

"So we're still in the game with five thals?"

"Yes," said Aubrey with a smile, "we're still in the game."

I dropped in to see Mum on the way home, ostensibly to take Hamlet and the dodos round to Landen's place. I found my mother in the kitchen with Bismarck, who seemed to be in the middle of telling her a joke.

". . . and then the white horse he says, 'What, Erich?' "

"Oh, Herr B!" said my mother, giggling and slapping him on the shoulder. "You are a wag!"

She noticed me standing there.

"Thursday! Are you okay? I heard on the radio there was some sort of accident involving a piano. . . ."

"I'm fine, Mum, really." I stared coldly at the Prussian Chancellor who, I had decided, was taking liberties with my mother's affections. "Good afternoon, Herr Bismarck. So, you haven't sorted out the Schleswig-Holstein question yet?"

"I am waiting still for the Danish prime minister," replied Bismarck, rising to greet me. "But I am growing impatient."

"I expect him very soon, Herr Bismarck," said my mother, putting the kettle on the stove. "Would you like a cup of tea while you're waiting?"

He bowed politely again. "Only if Battenberg cake we will be having."

"I'm sure there's a bit left over if that naughty Mr. Hamlet hasn't eaten it!" Her face dropped when she discovered that, indeed, naughty Mr. Hamlet *had* eaten it. "Oh dear! Would you like an almond slice instead?"

Bismarck's eyebrows twitched angrily.

"Everywhere I turn, the Danish are mocking my person and the

German Confederation," he intoned angrily, smacking his fist into his open palm. "The incorporation of the Duchy of Schleswig into Danish state overlooked I might have, but personal Battenberg insult I will not. It is war!"

"Hang on a minute, Otto," said my mother, who, having brought up a large family almost single-handedly, was well placed to sort out the whole Battenberg-Schleswig-Holstein issue. "I thought we'd agreed that you weren't going to invade Denmark."

"That was then, this is now," muttered the Chancellor, puffing out his chest so aggressively that one of his brass buttons shot across the room and struck Pickwick a glancing blow on the back of the head. "Choice: Mr. Hamlet for his behavior apologizes on behalf of Danish people, or we go to war!"

"He's talking to that nice conflict-resolution man at the moment," replied my mother in an anxious tone.

"Then it *is* war," announced Bismarck, sitting down at the table and having an almond slice anyway. "More talk is pointless. Return I wish to 1863."

But then the door opened. It was Hamlet. He stared at us all and looked . . . well, *different*.

"Ah!" he said, drawing his sword. "Bismarck! Your aggressive stance against Denmark is at an end. Prepare . . . to die!"

The conflict-resolution talk had obviously affected him deeply. Bismarck, unmoved by the sudden threat to his life, drew a pistol.

"So! Battenberg you finish behind my back, yes?"

And they might have killed one another there and then if Mum and I hadn't intervened.

"Hamlet!" I said. "Killing Bismarck won't get your father back, now, will it?"

"Otto!" said Mum. "Killing Hamlet won't alter the feelings of the Schleswigers, now, will it?"

I took Hamlet into the hall and tried to explain why sudden retributive action might not be such a good idea after all.

"I disagree," he said, swishing his sword through the air. "The first thing I shall do when I get home is kill that murdering uncle of mine, marry Ophelia and take on Fortinbras. Better still, I shall invade

Norway in a preemptive bid, and then Sweden, and--what's the one next to that?"

"Finland?"

"That's the one."

He placed his left hand on his hip and lunged aggressively with his sword at some imaginary foe. Pickwick made the mistake of walking into the corridor at that precise moment and made a startled *plooock* noise as the point of Hamlet's rapier stopped two inches from her head. She looked unsteady for a moment, then fainted clean away.

"That conflict-management specialist really taught me a thing or two, Miss Next. Apparently my problem was an unresolved or latent conflict--the death of my father--that persists and festers in an individual--me. To face up to problems, we must meet those conflicts head-on and resolve them to the best of our ability!"

It was worse than I thought.

"So you won't pretend to be mad and talk a lot, then?"

"No need," replied Hamlet, laughing. "The time for talking is over. Polonius will be for the high jump, too. As soon as I marry his daughter, he'll be fired as adviser and made chief librarian or something. Yes, we're going to have some changes around my play, I can tell *you*."

"What about building tolerance between opponents for a longstanding peaceful and ultimately rewarding coexistence between the conflicting parties?"

"I think he was going to cover that in the second session. It doesn't matter. By this time tomorrow, *Hamlet* will be a dynamic tale of one man's revenge and rise to power as the single greatest king Denmark has ever seen. It's the end of Hamlet the ditherer and the beginning of Hamlet the man of action! There's something rotten in the state of Denmark, and Hamlet says . . . it's payback time!"

This was bad. I couldn't send him back until Mrs. Tiggy-winkle and Shgakespeare had sorted out his play, and in this condition there was no saying *what* he was capable of. I had to think fast.

"Good idea, Hamlet. But *before* that, I think you might like to know that Danish people are being insulted and maligned here in England, and that Kierkegaard, Andersen, Branner, Blixen and Farquitt are having their books burned."

He went quiet and stared at me with dumbstruck horror in his eyes.

"I am doing what I can to stop this," I went on, "but--"

"Daphne's books are being burned?"

"You know of her?"

"Of course. I'm a big fan. We have to have *something* to do during those long winters at Elsinore. Mum's a big fan, too--although my uncle prefers Catherine Cookson. But enough talk," he carried on, his postprevarication, nonhesitative brain clicking over rapidly, "what shall we do about it?"

"Everything hinges on us winning the SuperHoop tomorrow, but we need a show of force in case Kaine tries anything. Can you get together as many Danish supporters as you can?"

"Is it very important?"

"It could be vital."

Hamlet's eyes flashed with steely resolution. He picked his skull off the hall table, placed a hand on my shoulder and struck a dramatic pose.

"By tomorrow morning, my friend, you will have more Danes than you know what to do with. But stay this idle chitter-chatter--I must away!"

And without another word, he was out the door. From all-talk-no-action, he was now all-action-no-talk. I should *never* have brought him into the real world.

"By the way," said Hamlet who had popped his head back around the door, "you won't tell Ophelia about Emma, will you?"

"My lips are sealed."

I gathered up the dodos and popped them in the car, then drove home. I had called Landen soon after Cindy's accident to say I was unhurt. He said he knew all along I'd come to no harm, and I promised that I'd avoid assassins where possible from now onwards. I couldn't pull up outside the house as there were at least three news vans, so I parked round the back, walked through the alleyway, nodded a greeting to Millon and walked across the back lawn to the French windows.



"Lipsum!" said Friday, running up to give me a hug. I picked him up as Alan sized up his new home, trying to work out the areas of highest potential mischief.

"There's a telegram for you on the table," said Landen, "and if you're feeling masochistic the press would love you to reiterate how the Mallets will win tomorrow."

"Well, I'm not," I replied, tearing open the telegram. "How was your . . ."

My voice trailed off as I read the telegram. It was clear and to the point. WE HAVE UNFINISHED BUSINESS. COME ALONE, NO TRICKS, HANGAR D, SWINDON AIRPARK--KAINE.

"Darling?" I called out.

"Yes?" came Landen's voice from upstairs.

"I have to go out."

"Assassins?"

"No--megalomaniac tyrants keen on global domination."

"Do you want me to wait up?"

"No, but Friday needs a bath--and don't forget behind the ears."

## Kaine v. Next

### Anti-Smite Technology Faces Criticism

Leading churchmen were not keen on Mr. Kaine's use of Anti-Smite technology. "We're not sure Mr. Kaine can place his will above that of God," said a nervous bishop who preferred not to be named, "but if God decides to smite something, then we think He had probably very good reason to do so." Atheists weren't impressed by Kaine's plans, nor that the cleansing of Oswestry was anything but an unlucky hit by a meteorite. "This smacks of the usual Kainian policy of keeping us cowed and afraid," said Rupert Smercc of Ipswich. "While the population worries about nonexistent threats from a product of mankind's need for meaning in a dark and brutal world, Kaine is raising taxes and blaming the Danes for everything." Not everyone was so forthright in condemnation. Mr. Pascoe, official spokesman of the Federated Agnostics, claimed, "There might be something in the whole smiting thing, but we're not sure."

Article in *The Mole*, July 1988

It was night when I arrived at Swindon Airpark's maintenance depot. Although airships still droned out into the night sky from the terminal opposite, this side of the field was deserted and empty, the workers long since punched out for the day. I showed my badge to security then followed the signs along the perimeter road and passed a docked airship, its silvery flanks shimmering with the reflected moon. The eight-story-high main doors of the gargantuan Hangar D were shut tight but I soon found a black Mercedes sports car near an open side door, so I stopped a little way short and killed my engine and lights. I replaced the clip in my automatic with the spare that I had loaded with five eraserheads--all I had managed to smuggle out of the BookWorld. I got out of the car, paused to listen and, hearing nothing, made my way quietly into the hangar.

Since the transcontinental "thousand-footer" airships were built these days at the Zeppelinwerks in Germany, the only airship within the cathedral-sized hangar was a relatively small sixty-seater, halfway through construction and looking like a metallic basket, its aluminum ribs held together with a delicate filigree of interconnecting struts each riveted carefully to the next. It looked overly complex for something in essence so simple. I glanced around the lofty interior but of Kaine there was no sign. I pulled out my automatic, chambered the first eraserhead and released the safety.

"Kaine?"

No answer.

I heard a noise and whipped my gun towards where a partly completed engine nacelle was resting on some trestles. I cursed myself for being so jumpy and suddenly realized that I wished Bradshaw was with me. Then I felt it--or at least, I *smelt* it. The lazy stench of death borne on a light breeze. I turned as a dark fetid shape loomed rapidly towards me. I had a brief vision of some unearthly terror before I pulled the trigger and the hollow thud of my first eraserhead hit home and the hellbeast evaporated into a flurry of the individual letters that made up its existence. They fell about me with the light tinkling sound of Christmas decorations shattering.

I heard the sound of a single slow handclap and noticed the silhouette of Kaine standing behind the partly finished control gondola. I didn't pause for a moment and let fly a second eraserhead. In an instant Kaine invoked a minor character--a small man with glasses--right in the path of the projectile and he, not Kaine, was erased.

Yorrick moved into the light. He hadn't aged a day since I had seen him last. His complexion was unblemished and he didn't have a hair out of place. Only the finest described characters were indistinguishable from real people; the rest--and Kaine was among them--had a vague plasticity that belied their fictional origins.

"Enjoying yourself?" I asked him sarcastically.

"Oh yes," he replied, giving me a faint smile.

He was a B character in an A role and had been elevated far beyond his capabilities--a child in control of a nation. Whether by virtue of Goliath or the Ovinator or simply by his fictional roots I wasn't sure, but what I did know was that he was dangerous in the real world and dangerous in the BookWorld. Anyone who could invoke hellbeasts at

will was not to be ignored.

I fired again and the same thing happened. The character was different--from a costume drama, I think--but the effect was identical. Kaine was using expendable bit parts as shields. I glanced nervously around, sensing a trap.

"You forget," said Kaine as he stared at me with his unblinking eyes, "that I have had many years to hone my powers, and as you can see, nobodies from the Farquitt canon are ten a penny."

"Murderer!"

Kaine laughed.

"You can't murder a fictional person, Thursday. If you could, every author would be behind bars!"

"You know what I mean," I growled, beginning to move forwards. If I could just grasp hold of him I could jump into fiction and take him with me. Kaine knew this and kept his distance.

"You're something of a pest, you know," he carried on, "and I really thought the Windowmaker would have been able to dispose of you so I wouldn't have to. Despite the woefully poor odds on Swindon winning tomorrow, I really can't risk Zvlkx's revealment coming true, no matter how unlikely. And my friends at Goliath agree with me."

"This place is not your place," I told him, "and you are messing with real people's lives. You were created to entertain, not to rule."

"Have you any idea," he carried on as we slowly circled one another about the airship's unfinished control gondola, "just what it's like being stuck as a B-9 character in a self-published novel? Never being read, having two lines of dialogue and constantly being bettered by my inferiors?"

"What's wrong with the character exchange program?" I asked, stalling for time.

"I tried. Do you know what the Council of Genres told me?"

"I'm all ears."

"They told me to do the best with what I had. Well, I'm doing exactly that, Miss Next!"

"I have some swing with the council, Kaine. Surrender and I'll do the best I can for you."

"Lies!" spat Kaine. "Lies, lies, and more lies! You have no intention of helping me!"

I didn't deny it.

"Well," he carried on. "I said I needed to speak to you, and here it is: you've found out where I'm from, and despite my best efforts to retain all copies of *At Long Last Lust*, there is still a possibility you might find a copy and delete me from within. I can't have that. So I wanted to give you the opportunity of entering into a mutually agreeable partnership. Something that will benefit both of us. Me in the corridors of power and you as head of any SpecOps division you want--or SpecOps itself, come to that."

"I think you underestimate me," I said quietly. "The only deal I'm listening to tonight will be your unconditional surrender."

"Oh, I didn't underestimate you at all," continued the Chancellor with a slight smile. "I only said that to give a Gorgon friend of mine enough time to creep up behind you. Have you met . . . Medusa, by the way?"

I heard a hissing noise behind me. The hairs on my neck rose and my heart beat faster. I looked down as I twisted and jumped to the side, resisting any temptation to look at the naked and repellent creature that had been slinking towards me. It's difficult to hit a target that you are trying not to look at and my fourth eraserhead impacted harmlessly on a gantry on the other side of the hangar. I stepped back, caught my foot on a piece of metal and collapsed over backwards, my gun skittering across the floor towards some packing cases. I swore and attempted to scramble away from the mythological horror, only to have my ankle grasped by Medusa, whose head snakes were now hissing angrily. I tried to kick off her grasp but she had a grip like a vise. Her free hand grabbed my other ankle and then, cackling wildly, she crept her way up my body as I struggled in vain to push her away, her sharply nailed claws biting into my flesh and making me cry out in pain.

"Stare into my face!" screamed the Gorgon as we wrestled in the dust. "Stare into my face and accept your destiny!" I kept my eyes averted as she pinned me against the cold concrete and then, when her bony and foul-smelling body was sitting on my chest, she cackled again and took hold of my head in both hands. I screamed and shut my eyes tight, gagging at her putrid breath. It was no escape. I felt her hands move on my face, her fingertips on my eyelids.

"Come along, Thursday my love," she screeched, the hissing of the

snakes almost drowning her out, "gaze into my soul and feel your body turn to stone--!"

I strained and cried out as her fingers pulled my eyelids open. I swiveled my eyes as low in their sockets as I could, desperate to stave off the inevitable, and was just beginning to see glimmers of light and the lower part of her body when there was the sound of steel being drawn from a scabbard and a soft *whoop* noise. Medusa fell limp and silent on my chest. I opened my eyes and pushed the severed head of the Gorgon into the shadows. I jumped up, slipped once in the pool of blood issuing from her headless corpse and ran backwards, stumbling in my panic to get away.

"Well," said a familiar voice. "Looks like I got here just in time!"

It was the Cheshire Cat. He was sitting on an unfinished airship rib and was grinning wildly. He wasn't alone. Next to him stood a man. But it wasn't any ordinary man. He was, firstly, tall--at least seven foot six and broad with it. He was dressed in rudimentary armor and grasped in his powerful hands a shield and sword that appeared to weigh almost nothing. He was a frightening warrior to behold; the sort of hero for whom epics are written--the likes of which we have no need of in our day and age. He was the most alpha of males--he was Beowulf. He made no sound, knees slightly bent in readiness, bloody sword moving elegantly in a slow figure-eight pattern.

"Good move, Mr. Cat," said Kaine sardonically, stepping from behind the gondola and facing us across the only open area in the hangar.

"You can end this right now, Mr. Kaine," said the Cat. "Go back to your book and stay there--or face the consequences."

"I choose not to," he replied with an even smile, "and since you have raised the stakes by invoking an eighth-century hero, I challenge you to a one-on-one invocation contest pitting my fictional champions against yours. You win and I stay forever in *At Long Last Lust*; I win and you leave me unmolested."

I looked at the Cheshire Cat who was, for once, not smiling.

"Very well, Mr. Kaine. I accept your challenge. Usual rules? One beast at a time and *strictly* no kraken?"

"Yes, yes," replied Kaine impatiently. He closed his eyes and with a wild shriek Grendel appeared and flew towards Beowulf, who expertly sliced it into eight more or less equal pieces.

"I think we got him riled," whispered the Cheshire Cat from the corner of his mouth. "That was a bad move--Beowulf *always* vanquishes Grendel."

But Kaine didn't waste any more time and a moment later there was a living, breathing *Tyrannosaurus rex* tramping the concrete floor, fangs drooling with saliva. It whipped its tail angrily and knocked the engine nacelle onto its side.

"From *The Lost World*," queried the Cat, "or *Jurassic Park*?"

"Neither," replied Kaine. "*The Boy's Bumper Book of Dinosaurs*."

"Ooh!" replied the Cat. "The nonfiction gambit, eh?"

Kaine clicked his fingers and the thunder lizard lunged forwards as Beowulf went into the attack, sword flailing. I retreated towards the Cat and asked anxiously, "This Beowulf isn't the original, is it?"

"Good Lord no, *quite* the reverse!"

It was just as well. Beowulf had made mincemeat of Grendel but the *Tyrannosaurus*, in turn, made mincemeat of him. As the giant lizard slurped down the remnants of the warrior, the Cat hissed to me: "I do so love these competitions!"

I wiped my scratched face with my handkerchief. I must say I couldn't really share the Cat's mischievous sense of glee or enjoyment. "What's our next move?" I asked him. "Smaug the dragon?"

"No point. He'd invoke a Baggins to kill it. Perhaps it would be best to make a tactical retreat and introduce an Allan Quatermain with an elephant gun, but I'm late for my son's birthday party, so it's going to be . . . *him!*"

There was another shimmer in the air about us and, with a whiffling and a burbling, a bat-winged creature appeared. It had a long tail, reptilian feet, flaming eyes, huge sort of *catchy* hairy claws . . . and was wearing a lilac-colored tunic with matching socks.

The *Tyrannosaurus* looked up from its feast at the jabberwock who stared back at it while hovering in the air and making dangerous whiffling noises. It was about the same size as the dinosaur and went for it aggressively, jaws biting, claws catching. As the Cat, Kaine and I looked on, the jabberwock and the *Tyrannosaurus* rolled around in mortal combat, tails flailing. At one point it looked as though Kaine's champion had the upper hand until the jabberwock executed a maneuver known in wrestling circles as an "airplane spin and body slam" that shook the ground. The giant lizard lay still, moving feebly.

An animal that large does not need to fall from very high to break bones. The jabberwock burred contentedly to itself, doing a little triumphant two-step dance as he walked back over to us.

"Right!" yelled Kaine. "I've had just about my fill of this!"

He raised his arms in the air and a gale seemed to fill the hangar. There were several crashes of thunder from outside and a large shape started to rise within the empty framework of the half-built airship. It grew and grew until it was wearing the airship skeleton like a corset, then broke free of it and with one tentacle clasped the jabberwock and raised it high in the air. Kaine had cheated. It was the kraken. Wet, strangely shapeless and smelling of overcooked oysters, it was the largest and most powerful creature that I knew of in fiction.

"Now, now!" said the Cat, waving a claw at Kaine. "Remember the rules!"

"To hell with your rules!" shouted Kaine. "Puny Jurisdiction agents, prepare to meet thy doom!"

"Now that," said the Cat, addressing me, "was a *very* corny line."

"He's Farquitt! What did you expect? What are we going to do?"

The kraken wrapped a slippery tentacle several times around the jabberwock's body and then squeezed until his eyes bulged ominously.

"Cat!" I said more urgently. "*What's the next move?*"

"I'm thinking," replied the Cat, lashing his tail angrily. "Trying to come up with something to defeat the kraken is not that easy. Wait. Wait. I think I've got it!"

There was a bright flash and there, facing the kraken, was--a small fairy no higher than my knee. It had delicate wings like those of a dragonfly, a silver tiara and a wand, which she waved in Kaine's direction. In an instant the kraken had melted away and the jabberwock fell to the ground, gasping for breath.

"What the hell--?" shouted Kaine in anger and surprise, waving his hands uselessly to try and bring the kraken back.

"I'm afraid you've lost," replied the Cat. "But you cheated and I had to cheat a bit, too, and even though I've won I can't insist on my prize. It's all in Thursday's hands now."

"What do you mean?" shouted Kaine angrily. "Who was that and why can't I summon up beasts from fiction any longer?"



"Well," said the Cat as he began to purr, "that was the Blue Fairy, from *Pinocchio*."

"You mean--?" asked Kaine, mouth agape.

"Right," replied the Cat. "She made you into a real person, just like she made Pinocchio into a real boy."

He touched his hands on his chest, then his face, trying to figure it out.

"But . . . that means you have no authority over me--!"

"Alas not," replied the Cat. "Jurisfiction has no jurisdiction over real people in the real world. As I said, it's all up to Thursday now."

The Cat stopped and repeated two words as if to see which sounded better. "Jurisfiction--*jurisdiction*--Jurisfiction--*jurisdiction*."

Kaine and I stared at one another. If he was real it definitely meant Jurisfiction had no mandate to control him and it also meant we couldn't destroy him through his book. But then he couldn't escape from the real world either--and would bleed and die and age like a real man. Kaine started to laugh.

"Well, this is a turnaround! Thank you very much, Mr. Cat!" The Cheshire Cat gave a contemptuous snort and turned to face the other direction. "You have done me a great service," continued Kaine. "I am now free to lead this country to new heights without the meddling of you and your fictional band of idiots. I'll be free to put behind me the last vestiges of kindness that I was forced to carry because of my written character. Mr. Cat, I thank you, and the people of the unified Britain thank you." He laughed again and turned to me. "And you, Miss Next, won't be able to even get close!"

"There's still the Seventh Revealment," I said a bit weakly.

"Win the SuperHoop? With that ragtag bunch of no-hopers? I think you grossly overrate your chances, my lady--and with Goliath and the Ovinator to help me, I can't begin to overestimate mine!"

And he laughed again, looked at his watch and walked briskly from the hangar. We heard his car start up and drive away.

"Sorry," said the Cat, still looking the other way. "I had to think of something quickly. At least this way he didn't win--tonight."

I sighed. "You did well, Chesh--I would *never* have thought of invoking the Blue Fairy."

"It was quite good, wasn't it?" agreed the Cat. "Can you smell hot buttered crumpets?"

"No."

"Me neither. Who are you going to put on midfield?"

"Biffo, probably," I said slowly, picking up my automatic from where it had fallen and replacing the clip, "and Stig as roquet taker."

"Ah. Well, good luck and see you soon," said the Cat, and vanished.

I sighed and looked around at the quiet and empty hangar. The fictional gore and corpses of Medusa, the *Tyrannosaurus* and Beowulf had vanished and apart from the wrecked airship, there was no evidence of the battle that had been fought here. We had scored a victory against Kaine but not the total victory I had hoped for. I was just walking back towards the exit when I noticed the Cheshire Cat had reappeared, balanced on the handle of a pallet trolley.

"Did you say Stig, or fig?" asked the Cat.

"I said Stig," I replied, "and I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly--you make one quite giddy."

"All right," said the Cat and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.

## Before the Match

### Zvlkx Followers Hold Nighttime Peace March.

All seventy-six members of the Idolatry Friends of St. Zvlkx spent the night silently marching between the places of interest of their worshipful leader, who was hit by a Number 23 bus on Friday. The march began at Tesco's car park and visited places in Swindon that St. Zvlkx held most dear--seven pubs, six betting shops and Swindon's leading brothel--before undertaking a silent prayer at his place of death. The march went off peacefully, except for numerous interruptions by a woman who gave her name as Shirley and insisted that Zvlkx owed her money.

Article in the *Swindon Daily Eyestrain*, July 22, 1988

I arrived at the croquet stadium at eight. The fans were already waiting at the turnstiles, hoping to get the best seats in the stands. I was waved past and parked my Speedster in the manager's parking spot, then made my way into the changing rooms. Aubrey was waiting there for me, pacing up and down.

"Well?" he said. "Where's our team?"

"They'll be here at one o'clock."

"Can't we get them here earlier?" he asked. "We need to discuss tactics."

"No," I said firmly. "They'll be here on time. It's senseless to try to impose human time constraints on them. They're playing on our side--that's the main thing."

"Okay," agreed Aubrey reluctantly. "Have you met Penelope Hrah?"

Penelope was a large and powerful woman who looked as though she could crack walnuts with her eyelids. She had moved to croquet because hockey wasn't violent enough, and although at thirty-two she

was at the end of her career, she might prove an asset--as a terror weapon, if nothing else. She scared me--and I was on the same team.

"Hello Penelope," I said nervously. "I really appreciate you joining us."

"Urg."

"Everything okay? Can I get you something?"

She grunted again, and I rubbed my hands together anxiously.

"Right, well, leave you to it, then."

I left her to talk strategy with Alf and Aubrey. I spent the next couple of hours doing interviews and ensuring that the team's lawyers were up to speed on the game's complex legal procedures. At midday Landen and Friday arrived with Mycroft, Polly and my mother. I took them down to the seating reserved for the VIPs just behind the players' benches and sat them down next to Joffy and Miles, who had arrived earlier.

"Is Swindon going to win?" asked Polly.

"I hope so," I said, not brimming with confidence.

"The problem with you, Thursday," put in Joffy, "is that you have no faith. We in the Idolatry Friends of St. Zvlkx have complete faith in the revealments. Lose and Goliath moves to new heights of human exploitation and unfathomable avarice, hidden amongst the trappings of religious formality and perverted ecclesiastical dogma."

"That was a very good speech."

"Yes, I thought so, too. I was practicing on the march last night. Don't feel you're under any pressure now."

"Thanks for nothing. Where's Hamlet?"

"He said he'd join us later."

I left them to do a live broadcast with Lydia Startright, who was really more interested in knowing where I had been for the past two and a half years than asking me about Swindon's chances. After this I hurried down to the players' entrance to welcome Stig--who was playing--and the four other neanderthals. They were completely unfazed by the media attention and ignored the phalanx of pressmen completely. I thanked them for joining our team, and Stig pointed out that they were there only because that was part of the deal, and nothing more.

I walked them towards the changing rooms, where the human team members greeted them with a good measure of curiosity. They talked haltingly with one another, the neanderthals confining their speech to the technical aspects of croquet play. It was of no matter or consequence to them if they won or lost--they would simply do the best they could. They refused body armor, as they preferred instead to play barefoot in shorts and brightly colored Hawaiian shirts. This caused a slight problem with the Toast Marketing Board, which had insisted that its name be on the team strip, but I smoothed it over with them eventually and all was well. There was less than ten minutes before we were due out, so Aubrey made a stirring speech to the team, which the neanderthals didn't really comprehend. Stig, whose understanding of humans was perhaps a little better than most, just told them to "hoop as much as we can," which they understood.

"Miss Next?"

I turned to face a thin, cadaverous man staring at me. I recognized him instantly. It was Ernst Stricknene, Kaine's adviser--and he was carrying a red briefcase. I had seen a similar case at Goliathopolis and during *Evade the Question Time*. It doubtless concealed an Ovinator.

"What do you want?"

"Chancellor Kaine would like to meet the Swindon team for a pep talk."

"Why?"

Stricknene looked at me coldly. "It is not for you to question the will of the Chancellor, young lady."

It was then that Kaine marched in, surrounded by his goons and entourage. The team stood up respectfully--except the neanderthals, who, completely ambivalent to the vagaries of perceived hierarchy, carried on talking to one another in soft grunts. Kaine looked at me triumphantly, but I noticed, too, that he had changed slightly. His eyes looked tired and his mouth had a barely discernible sag to it. He'd started to show signs of being human. He was beginning to age.

"Ah!" he said. "The ubiquitous Miss Next. LiteraTec, team manager, savior of *Jane Eyre*. Is there anything you can't do?"

"I'm not that good at knitting."

There was a ripple of laughter amongst the team, and also from Kaine's followers, who abruptly silenced themselves as Kaine glanced around the room, scowling. But he controlled himself and gave a

disingenuous smile after nodding to Stricknene.

"I just came down here to talk to the team and tell all of you that it would be a far better thing for this country if I stayed in power, and even though I don't know how Zvlkx's revealment will work, I can't leave the secure future of this nation to the vagaries of a thirteenth-century seer with poor personal hygiene. Do you understand what I am saying?"

I knew what he was up to. The Ovinator. It would, as likely as not, have us all eating out of his hand in under a minute. But I wasn't figuring on Hamlet, who appeared suddenly from behind Stricknene, rapier drawn.

It was now or nothing, and I yelled, "The briefcase! Destroy the Ovinator!"

Hamlet needed no second bidding, and he leapt into action, expertly piercing the case, which gave off a brief flash of green light and a short, high-pitched wail that started the police dogs outside barking. Hamlet was swiftly overpowered by two SO-6 agents, who handcuffed him.

"Who is this man?" demanded Kaine.

"He's my cousin Eddie."

"NO!" yelled Hamlet, standing up straight even though he had two men holding him. "My name is Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Danish, and proud of it!"

Kaine gave a smug laugh. "Captain, arrest Miss Next for harboring a known Danish person--and arrest the entire team for aiding and abetting."

It was a bad moment. With no players, the game had to be forfeited. But Hamlet, actioneer that he had become, was not out of ideas.

"I shouldn't do that if I were you."

"And why not?" sneered Kaine, not without a certain quaver in his voice; he was now acting solely on his wits. He had neither his fictional roots nor the Ovinator to help him.

"Because," announced Hamlet, "I am a very special friend of Ms. Daphne Farquitt."

"And . . . ?" inquired Kaine with a slight smile.

"She is outside awaiting my return. If I fail to reappear or you try

any sort of anti-Mallets skulduggery, she will mobilize her troops."

Kaine laughed, and Stricknene, sycophant that he was, laughed with him.

"Troops? What troops are these?" Kaine asked, amused.

But Hamlet was deadly serious. He glowered at them for a moment before answering. "Her fan club. They're highly organized, armed to the teeth, profoundly angry at having had their books burned and ready to move at her command. There are thirty thousand stationed near the stadium and a further ninety thousand in reserve. One word from Daphne and you're finished."

"I have reversed the law banning Farquitt," replied Kaine hastily. "They will disperse when they learn this."

"They will believe nothing from your lying tongue," replied Hamlet softly, "only that which Ms. Farquitt tells them. Your power is waning, my friend, and destiny's inelegant toe creaks the boards to your door."

There was a tense silence as Kaine stared at Hamlet and Hamlet stared back at Kaine. I'd witnessed quite a few standoffs but none with so much at stake.

"You haven't a hope in hell anyway," announced Kaine after considering his options carefully. "I'm going to enjoy watching the Whackers trash you. Release him."

The SO-6 agents uncuffed Hamlet and escorted Kaine out the door.

"Well," said Hamlet, "looks like we're back in the game. I'm going to watch with your mother. Win this one for the Farquitt fans, Thursday!"

And he was gone.

None of us had any time to ponder on the matter further, as we heard a Klaxon go off and an excited roar from the crowd echoed down the tunnel.

"Good luck, everyone," said Aubrey with a good measure of bravado. "It's showtime!"

The crowd erupted into screams of jubilation as we trotted down the tunnel onto the green. The stadium could seat thirty thousand, and it was packed. Large monitors had been set up outside for the benefit of those who could not get a seat, and the TV networks were beaming

the match live to an estimated 2 billion people in seventy-three countries worldwide. It was going to be quite a show.

I stayed on the touchline as the Swindon Mallets lined up face-to-face with the Reading Whackers. They all glared at one another as the Swindon & District Wheel-Tappers' Brass Band marched on, headed by Lola Vavoom. There was then a pause while President Formby took his seat in the VIP box and, again led by Ms. Vavoom, the audience stood to sing the unofficial English national anthem, "When I'm Cleaning Windows." After the song had finished, Yorrick Kaine appeared at the VIP box, but his reception was derisory at best. There was a smattering of applause and a few "Hail!"s, but nothing like the reception he was expecting. His anti-Danish stance had lost a lot of popular support when he'd made the mistake of accusing the Danish Women's Handball Team of being spies and arrested them. I saw him sit down and scowl at the President, who smiled back warmly.

I was standing at the touchline with Alf Widdershaine, watching the proceedings.

"Is there anything more we could have done?" I whispered.

"No," said Alf after a pause. "I just hope those neanderthals can cut the mustard."

I turned and walked back towards Landen. On his lap was Friday, gurgling and clapping his hands. I had taken him once to the chariot race in the novel of *Ben-Hur*, and he'd loved it.

"What are our chances, darling?" asked Landen.

"Reasonable to middling with the neanderthals playing. I'll speak to you later."

I gave them a kiss each, and Landen wished me good luck.

"Dolor in reprehenderit--Mummy," said Friday. I thanked him for his kind words and heard my name being called. It was Aubrey who was talking to the umpire, who, as custom dictated, was dressed as a country parson.

"What do you mean?" I heard Aubrey say in an outraged tone as I moved closer. It seemed there was some sort of altercation, and we hadn't even begun play yet. "Show me where it says that in the rules!"

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"It's the neanderthals," he said between gritted teeth. "According to the rules, it seems that nonhumans are barred from taking part!"



I glanced back to where Stig and the four other neanderthals were sitting in a circle, meditating.

"Rule 78b-45(ii)," quoted the umpire as O'Fathens, the Reading Whackers' captain, looked on with a gleeful expression, " 'No player or team may use an equine or any other nonhuman creature to gain an advantage over the opposing team.' "

"But that doesn't mean *players*," I said. "That rule clearly only refers to horse, antelope and so forth--it was brought in when the Dorchester Slammers attempted to gain the advantage by playing on horseback in 1962."

"The rules seem clear to me," growled O'Fathens, taking a step forwards. "Are neanderthals human?" Aubrey also took a step forwards. Their noses were almost touching.

"Well . . . sort of," I answered hesitantly.

There was nothing for it but to seek a judgment. Since the rules regarding on-field litigation had been relaxed ten years ago, it was not uncommon for the first half hour of a match to be taken up with legal wranglings by the teams' lawyers, of which each side was permitted two, with one substitute. It added a new form of drama to the proceedings but was not without its own problems: after a particularly litigious SuperHoop six years ago, when a legal argument was overturned in the high court two years after the match was played, it became mandatory that three high-court judges be at readiness to give an instant, unquestionable ruling on any legal point.

We approached the Port-a-Court, and our respective lawyers made their representations. The three judges retired to their chambers and returned a few minutes later to announce:

"It is the finding of this Croquet Appellant Court in the action *Mallets v. Whackers* (neanderthal player legality) that the Whackers' complaint is upheld. In the eyes of English law, neanderthals are *not* human, and cannot play."

The Reading side of the crowd erupted into joyous yells as the judges' ruling was run up on the screen.

Aubrey opened his mouth, but I pulled him aside.

"Don't waste your breath, Aubrey."

"We can prepare an appeal in seven minutes," said Mr. Runcorn, one of our lawyers. "I think we can find a nonhuman precedent in the *Worcester Sauces v. Taunton Ciders SuperHoop* semifinals of 1963."

Aubrey scratched his head and looked at me. "Thursday?"

"A failed appeal could result in a two-hoop forfeit," I pointed out. "I say we get the lawyers working on it. If they think it's worth a try, we'll lodge an appeal at the end of the first third."

"But we're five players down, and we haven't even picked up our mallets!"

"The game's not lost until it's lost, Aubrey. We've got a few tricks up our sleeve, too."

I wasn't kidding. I had visited the lawyers' pavilion earlier, where they were performing background checks on every player on the opposing side. The Whackers' striker, George "Rhino" McNasty, had fourteen unpaid parking violations, and our legal team successfully pleaded that this should be heard here and now; he was sentenced to an hour's community service, which effectively had him picking up litter in the car park until the end of the second third. Jambe turned back to Mr. Runcorn.

"Okay, prepare an appeal for the end of the first third. We'll start with what we've got."

Even with our substitute brought on, we still had only six players to their full complement of ten. But it got worse. To play on a local side, you had to have been born in the town or lived there for at least six months before playing. Our substitute, Johnno Swift, had lived here for only five months and twenty-six days when he began his career at the Mallets three years before. The Reading lawyers argued that he was playing illegally in his first match, a transgression that should have won him a life ban. Once again the judges upheld the complaint, and, to another excited yell from the crowd, Swift walked dejectedly back to the dressing rooms.

"Well," said O'Fathens, putting out his hand to Jambe, "we'll just accept you've conceded the match, okay?"

"We're playing, O'Fathens. Even if Swindon were to lose a thousand hoops, people will still say, 'This was their finest--' "

"I don't think so," interrupted the Whackers' team lawyer with a triumphant grin. "You're now down to only five players. Under Rule 681g, Subsection (f/6), 'Any team that fails to start the game with the minimum of six players forfeits the match.' "

He pointed out the entry in Volume 7 of the World Croquet League rule book. It was there, all right, just under the rules governing the

minimum raisin requirement in the buns served at the concession stands. Beaten! Beaten even before we'd picked up a mallet! Swindon could weather it, but the world could not--the revealment would be broken, and Kaine and Goliath would carry on their perverse plans unmolested.

"I'll announce it," said the umpire.

"No," said Alf, clicking his fingers, "we *do* have a player we can field!"

"Who?"

He pointed at me. "Thursday!"

I was gobsmacked. I hadn't played for over eight years.

"Objection!" blurted out the Whackers' lawyer. "Miss Next is *not* a native of Swindon!"

My inclusion would be of questionable value--but at least it meant we could play.

"I was born at St. Septyk's," I said slowly. "I'm Swindon enough for this team."

"Perhaps *Swindon* enough," said the lawyer, consulting a rule book hurriedly, "but not *experienced* enough. According to Rule 23f, Subsection (g/9), you are ineligible to play international-standard croquet since you have not played the minimum of ten matches to county standard."

I thought for a moment. "Actually, I have."

It was true. I used to play for the SpecOps Middlesex team when I was based in London. I was quite good, too--but nothing like these guys.

"It is the decision of the Croquet Appellant Court," intoned the three judges, who wanted to see a good game the same as anyone, "that Miss Next be allowed to represent her city in this match."

O'Fathens's face fell. "This is preposterous! What kind of stupid decision is that?"

The judges looked at him sternly. "It is the decision of this court--and we find you in contempt. The Whackers will forfeit one hoop."

O'Fathens boiled with inner rage, held it within him, turned on his heel and, followed by his lawyers, strode to where his team was

waiting.

"Good one!" laughed Aubrey. "The whistle hasn't even gone, and we're winning!"

He tried to sound full of enthusiasm, but it was difficult. We were fielding a six-strong team--five and a quarter if you count me--and still had an entire game to play.

"We've got ten minutes to the off. Thursday, get changed into Snake's spare set--he's about your size."

I dashed off to the changing rooms and dressed myself up in Snake's leg guards and shoulder pads. Widdershaine helped me adjust the straps around my chest, and I grabbed a spare mallet before running back onto the field, fiddling with my helmet strap just as Aubrey was beginning his strategy talk.

"In past matches," he said in a hushed tone, "the Whackers have been known to test a weak side with a standard 'Bomperini' opening tactic. A deflective feint towards midhoop left, but actually aiming for an undefended back-hoop right."

The team whistled low.

"But we'll be ready for them. I want them to know we're playing an aggressive game. Instead of backfooting it, we'll go straight into a surprise roquet maneuver. Smudger, you're to lead with a sideways deflection to Biffo, who'll pass to Thursday--"

"Wait," put in Biffo. "Thursday is here making up the numbers. She hasn't hit a ball in years!"

This was true. But Jambe had bigger plans.

"Exactly. I want them to think Thursday is a dark horse--that we *planned* this late addition. With a bit of luck, they'll waste a good player marking her. Thursday, drive it towards their red ball, and Spike will intercept. It doesn't matter if you miss--I want them to be *confused* by our tactics. And, Penelope--just frighten the other team."

"Urg," grunted the wingwoman.

"Okay, keep it tight, no more violence than is necessary, and keep an eye out for the Duchess. She's not averse to a bit of ankle swiping."

We all tapped our fists together and made a *harump* noise. I walked slowly to my place on the green, my heart beating with the pump of adrenaline.

"You okay?" It was Aubrey.

"Sure."

"Good. Let's play some croquet."

## WCL SuperHoop-88

*2:00 P.M., Saturday, July 22, 1988, Swindon Stadium, Wessex*

### Reading Whackers:

Tim O'Fathens, Captain

Molly "The Mark" Stern, Midfield

Tim "The Mouse" McCall, Forward Striker

Gretchen "Barker" Koss, Striker

Wallace "Back to Front" Acadia, Defense

~~George "Rhino" McNasty, Striker~~

Alessandra

Lusardi, Roquet Taker

"Bonecrusher" McSneed, Forward Hoop

Freddie "Dribbler" Loehnis, Peg Defense

Duchess of Sheffield, Wingman

**Legal Team:** Wapcaplitt & Sfortz

**Linesman:** Bruce Giffords

**Coach:** Geoffrey Snurge

### Swindon Mallets:

Aubrey Jambe, Captain

Alan "Biffo" Mandible, Midfield

"Snake" Spillikin, Forward Striker

~~Grunk (neanderthal), Defense~~

~~Warg (neanderthal), Striker~~

~~Dorf (neanderthal), Peg Defense~~

~~Stiggins (neanderthal), Roquet Taker~~

"Smudger" Blarney, Forward Hoop

~~Zim (neanderthal), Striker~~ Penelope Hrah,

Midhoop Wingman  
Thursday Next, Manager/Midfield

**Legal Team:** Runcorn & Twizzit

**Sub:** ~~John "Johnno" Swift~~ **Coach:** Alf Widdershaine

I took up my station at the twenty-yard line and looked around the green. The rhododendron bushes in the center occluded my vision of the back-hoop right; I glanced up at the scoreboard and clock. Two minutes to go. There were three other natural hazards that we were to play around on the green--the Tea Party, which even now was being stocked by volunteers, the garden roller, and the Italian Sunken Garden. Once the Tea Party volunteers were safe and the parson umpire was happy his curate linesmen were all in position, the Klaxon went off with a loud blare.

Many things happened at once. There were two almost simultaneous *clacks* as both teams whacked off, and I ran forward instinctively to intercept the pass from Biffo. Since the Whackers didn't think I was of any use, I had been left unmarked, and Biffo's pass came sailing towards me. I was flushed by the excitement and caught it in midair, smashing it towards the opponent's ball for what looked like an aerial roquet. It didn't work. I missed by about a foot. The opponent's ball carried on to the forty-yard line where McCall blasted it through the back-hoop right--the classic Bomperini opener. I didn't have time to think about it, as there was a shout of "Thursday!" from Aubrey, and I turned to make a swipe at the opposition's ball. The Klaxon went, and everyone stopped playing. I had touched the opponent's ball when south of the forty-yard line after it had been passed from the last person to have hit a red ball in the opposite direction--one of the more obvious offside transgressions.

"Sorry, guys," I said as the Whackers lined up to take their penalty. O'Fathens took the shot and catapulted our ball into the rhododendrons. As George tried to find it, and with our other ball out of play in the Italian Sunken Garden, the Whackers went on the offensive and hooped three times before we'd even realized it. Even when we found the ball, we were too dispersed, and after another

twenty-eight minutes of hard defensive footwork, managed to end the first third with only four hoops to Reading's eight.

"There are too many of them," panted Snake. "Eight-four is the worst opening score for a SuperHoop final ever."

"We're not beat yet," replied Jambe, taking a drink. "Thursday, you played well."

"Well?" I returned, taking off my helmet and wiping the sweat from my brow. "I sank the ball with my first whack and dropped us a hoop on the offside penalty!"

"But we still *scored* a hoop--and we would have already lost if you hadn't joined us. You just need to relax more. You're playing as though the world depended on it."

The team didn't know it, but I was.

"Just calm down a bit, take a second before you whack, and you'll be fine. Biffo--good work, and nice hoop, Penelope, but if you chase their wingman again, you might be booked."

"Urg," replied Penelope.

"Mr. Jambe?" said Mr. Runcorn, who had been working on a rearguard legal challenge to the antineanderthal ruling.

"Yes? Do we have a case?"

"I'm afraid not. I can't seem to find any grounds for one. The nonhuman precedent was overruled on appeal. I'm very sorry, sir. I think I'm playing very badly--might I resign and bring on the legal substitute?"

"It's not your fault," said Jambe kindly. "Have the substitute lawyer continue the search."

Runcorn bowed and went to sit on the lawyers' bench, where a young man in a badly fitting suit had been sitting silently throughout the first third.

"That Duchess is murder," muttered Biffo, breathlessly. "She almost had me twice."

"Isn't striking an opponent a red-card three-hoop penalty offense?" I asked.

"Of course! But if she can take out our best player, then it might be worth it. Keep an eye on her, everyone."



"Mr. Jambe?"

It was the referee, who told us further litigation had been brought against our team. We dutifully approached the Port-a-Court, where the judges were just signing an amendment to the World Croquet League book of law.

"What is it?"

"As a result of the Danish Economic (Scapegoat) Act coming into law, people of Danish descent are not permitted to vote or take key jobs."

"When did this law come into effect?"

"Five minutes ago."

I looked up at Kaine in the VIP box, where he smiled and waved at me.

"So?" asked Jambe. "Kaine's dopey ideas have no reflection on croquet--this is sport, not politics."

The Whackers' lawyer, Mr. Wapcaplitt, coughed politely.

"In that you would be mistaken. The definition of 'key job' includes being a highly paid sports personality. We have conducted some background checks and discovered that Ms. Penelope Hrah was born in Copenhagen--she's Danish."

Jambe was silent.

"I might have been born there, but I'm not Danish," said Hrah, taking a menacing step towards Wapcaplitt. "My parents were on holiday at the time."

"We are well aware of the facts," intoned Wapcaplitt, "and have already gained judgment on this matter. You *were* born in Denmark, you *are* technically Danish, you *are* in a 'key job,' and you are thus disqualified from playing on this team."

"Balls!" yelled Aubrey. "If she was born in a kennel, would that make her a dog?"

"Hmm," replied the attorney thoughtfully, "it's an interesting legal question."

Penelope couldn't contain herself any longer and went for him. It took four of us to hold her back, and she had to be forcibly restrained and frog-marched from the green.

"Down to five players," muttered Jambe. "Below the minimum player requirement."

"Yes," said Mr. Wapcaplitt glibly, "it appears the Whackers are the winners--"

"I think not," interrupted our substitute lawyer, whose name we learned was Twizzit. "As my most esteemed colleague so rightly pointed out, the rule states thus: 'Any team that fails to *start* the game with the minimum of six players forfeits the match.' The way I see it, the match has already begun, and we can carry on playing with five. Your Honors?"

The judges put their heads together for a moment and then pronounced, "This court finds for the Swindon Mallets in this matter. They may continue to play into the second third with five players."

We walked slowly back to the touchline. Four of the neanderthal players were still sitting on the bench, staring off into space.

"Where's Stig?" I asked them.

I didn't get an answer. The Klaxon for the second third went off, and I grabbed my mallet and helmet and hurried onto the green.

"New strategy, everyone," said Jambe to myself, Smudger, Snake and Biffo--all that remained of the Swindon Mallets--"we play defensively to make sure they don't score any more hoops. Anything goes--and watch out for the Duchess."

The second third was probably the most interesting third ever seen in World League Croquet. To begin with, Biffo and Aubrey whacked both of our own balls into the rhododendrons. This was a novel tactic and had two consequences: firstly, that we weren't going to score any hoops in the middle third by natural hooping, and second, that we denied the opposition any roquets off our balls. No advantage to win, clearly, but we weren't trying to win--we were fighting for survival. The Whackers had only to score thirty hoops and hit the center peg to win outright--and the way it was going, we wouldn't make the last third. Staving off the inevitable, perhaps, but World League Croquet is like that. Frustrating, violent and full of the unexpected.

"No prisoners!" yelled Biffo, waving his mallet above his head in a display of bravado that would sum up our second-third strategy. It worked. Freed from the constraint of ball defense, we all went into the attack and together caused some considerable problems to the Whackers, who were thrown by the unorthodox playing tactics. At one point I yelled "Offside!" and made up something so outrageously

complex that it sounded as if it *could* be true--it took ten minutes of precious time to prove that it wasn't.

By the time the second third ended, we were almost completely exhausted. The Whackers now led by twenty-one hoops to twelve, and we won another eight only because "Bonecrusher" McSneed had been sent off for trying to hit Jambe with his mallet and Biffo had been concussed by the Duchess.

"How many fingers am I holding up?" asked Alf.

"Fish," said Biffo, eyes wandering.

"You okay?" asked Landen when I had returned to the stands to see him.

"I'm okay," I puffed. "I'm out of shape, though."

Friday gave me a hug.

"Thursday?" hissed Landen in a hushed voice. "I've been thinking. Where did that piano actually come from?"

"What piano?"

"The one that fell on Cindy."

"Well, I suppose, it . . . just, well . . . *fell*--didn't it? What are you saying?"

"That it was a murder attempt."

"Someone tried to assassinate the assassin with a *piano*?"

"No. It hit her accidentally. I think it was intended for you!"

"Who'd want to kill me with a piano?"

"I don't know. Have there been any other unorthodox attempts on your life recently?"

"No."

"I think you're still in danger, sweetheart. Please be careful."

I kissed him again and stroked his face with a muddy hand.

"Sorry!" I muttered, trying to rub it off and making it worse. "But I've got too much to think about at the moment."

I ran off and joined Jambe for a last-third pep talk.

"Right," he said, handing out the Chelsea buns, "we're going to lose this match, but we're going to go out in glory. I don't want it to be said that the Mallets didn't fight until the last man standing. Right, Biffo?"

"Trilby."

We all knocked our fists together and made the *harump* noise again, the team reinvigorated--except for me. It was true that no one could say we didn't try, but for all Jambe's well-meaning rhetoric, in three weeks' time the earth would be a smoldering radioactive cinder, and no amount of tarnished glory would save Swindon or anyone else. But I helped myself to a Chelsea bun and a cup of tea anyway.

"I say," said Twizzit, who had suddenly appeared in the company of Stig.

"Have a bun!" said Aubrey. "We're going out in style!"

But Twizzit wasn't smiling. "We've been looking at Mr. Stig's genome--"

"His what?"

"His *genome*. The complete genetic plan of him and the other neanderthals."

"And?"

Twizzit rummaged through some papers. "They were all built between 1939 and 1948 in the Goliath BioEngineering labs. The thing is, the prototype neanderthal could not speak in words that we could understand--so they were built using a human voice box." Twizzit gave a curious half smile, as though he had produced a spare ace from his sleeve, and announced with great drama, "The neanderthals are 1.03 percent human."

"But that doesn't make them human," I observed. "How does this help us?"

"I agree they're not human," conceded Twizzit with the ghost of a smile, "but the rules specifically exclude anyone 'nonhuman.' Since they have *some* human in them, they technically can't fall into this category."

There was another long pause. I looked at Stig, who stared back and raised his eyebrows.

"I think we should lodge an appeal," muttered Jambe, leaving his Chelsea bun half eaten in his haste. "Stig, have your men limber up!"

The judges agreed with us. The 1.03 percent was enough to prove they *weren't* nonhuman and thus could not be excluded from play. While Wapcaplitt ran off to search the croquet statutes for a reason to appeal, the neanderthals--Grunk, Warg, Dorf, Zim and Stig--limbered up as the Whackers looked on nervously. Neanderthals had often been approached to play, as they could run all day without tiring, but no one until now had ever managed to get any.

"Okay, listen up," said Jambe, gathering us around. "We're back in the game at full strength. Thursday, I want you to stay on the benches to regain your breath. We're going to fool them with a Puchonski switch. Biffo is going to take the red ball from the forty-yard line over the rhododendron bushes, past the Italian Sunken Garden and into a close position to hoop five. Snake, you'll take it from there and croquet their yellow--Stig will defend you. Mr. Warg, I want you to mark their number five. He's dangerous, so you're going to have to use any tricks you can. Smudger, you're going to foul the Duchess--when the Vicar gives you the red card, I'm calling in Thursday. Yes?"

I didn't reply; for some reason I was having a sudden heavy bout of *deja vu*.

"Thursday?" repeated Aubrey. "Are you okay? You look like you're in a dreamworld!"

"I'm fine," I said slowly. "I'll wait for your command."

"Good."

We all did the *harump* thing, and they went to their places whilst I sat on the bench and looked once again at the scoreboard. We were losing twenty-one hoops to twelve.



*Aubrey nodded at Smudger, who took out the Duchess in grand style: they both careered into the Tea Party and knocked over the table.*

The Klaxon went off, and the game started with renewed aggression. Biffo whacked the yellow ball in the direction of the up-end hoop and hit the Whackers' ball. Warg took the roquet. With an expert swing, the opponents' ball tumbled into the Italian Sunken Garden, and ours sailed as straight as a die over the rhododendrons; a distant *clack* was mirrored by a roar from the crowd, and I knew the ball had been intercepted by Grunk and taken through the hoop.

Aubrey nodded at Smudger, who took out the Duchess in grand style: they both careered into the Tea Party and knocked over the table. The Klaxon sounded for a time-out while the Duchess was pulled clear of the tea things. She was conscious but had a broken ankle. Smudger was given the red card but no hoop penalty, as the Duchess had been shown the yellow card earlier for concussing Biffo. I joined the fray as play started up again, but the Whackers' early confidence was soon evaporating under a withering attack from the neanderthals, who could anticipate their every move simply by reading their body language. Warg passed to Grunk, who gave the ball such an almighty whack that it passed clear *through* the rhododendrons with a tearing of foliage and was converted by Zim on the other side towards an undefended hoop.

By the time there were three minutes to play, we had almost caught up: twenty-five hoops to the Whackers' twenty-nine. Firmly rattled, the Whackers missed a roquet and, with only a minute to run, scored their thirtieth hoop with us only two behind. All they had to do to win was "peg out" by hitting the center post. Whilst they were trying to do this and we tried our best to stop them, Grunk, with eight seconds to go and two hoops to make, whacked a clear double-hooper that went through one up-end hoop, all the forty yards down the green and through the mid. I'd never heard a crowd yell more.

We had leveled the score and desperately tried to get our ball to the peg in the scrum of players trying to stop the Whackers from doing the same. Warg grunted to Grunk, who ran towards the scrum and tore into them, taking six players down as Warg whacked the ball towards the now unprotected peg. It hit the peg fair and square--but a second *after* the Klaxon had sounded. Play had ended--in a draw.

## Sudden Death

### Neanderthals Turn Down Croquet Offer

A group of neanderthals unwisely turned down an exciting and unrepeatable offer from the Gloucester Meteors yesterday, following their astonishing performance at the 1988 Whackers v. Mallets SuperHoop on Saturday. The generous offer of ten brightly colored glass beads was rejected by a neanderthal spokesman, who declared that conflict, howsoever staged, was inherently insulting. The offer was raised to a set of solid-bottomed cook-ware, and this was also roundly rejected. A spokesman for the Meteors later stated that the neanderthal tactics displayed on Saturday were actually the result of some clever tricks taught them by the Mallets' team coach.

Article in *The Toad*, July 24, 1988

Good work," said Alf as we sat on the ground, panting hard. I had lost my helmet in the scrum somewhere but hadn't until now noticed. My armor was dirty and torn, my mallet handle had split, and there was a cut on my chin. The whole team was muddy, bruised and worn out--but we were still in with a good chance.

"What order?" asked the umpire, referring to the sudden-death penalty shoot-out. It worked quite simply. We took it in turns to hit the peg, each time moving back ten yards. There were six lines all the way back to the boundary. If we got them all, we started again until someone missed. Alf looked at the players who were still able to hold a mallet and put me seventh, so if we went around again, I was on the easiest ten-yard line.

"Biffo first, then Aubrey, Stig, Dorf, Warg, Grunk and Thursday."

The umpire jotted down our names and moved away. I went to see my family and Landen again.



"What about the steamroller?" he asked.

"What about the steamroller?"

"Didn't it nearly run you over?"

"An *accident*, Land. Gotta go. Bye."

The ten-yard line was simple; both players hit the peg with ease. The twenty-yard line was still no problem. The crowd roared as Reading hit the peg first, but our side roared equally when we hit ours. Thirty yards was no problem either--both teams hit the peg, and we all moved back to the forty-yard line. From this distance the peg was tiny, and I didn't see how anyone could hit it, but they did--first Stern for Reading, then Dorf for us. The crowd roared its support, but then there was a slight rumble of thunder and it began to rain, the full significance of which was yet to dawn.

"Where are they going?" asked Aubrey as Stig, Grunk, Dorf and Warg ran off to find shelter.

"It's a neanderthal thing," I explained as the rain increased dramatically to a downpour, the water streaming down our armor and onto the turf. "Neanderthals never work, play or even stand in the rain if they can help it. Don't worry, they'll be back as soon as it stops."

But it didn't stop.

"Fifty-yard penalty," announced the umpire. "O'Fathens for the Whackers and Mr. Warg for the Mallets."

I looked at Warg, who was sitting on the bench under the stands, staring at the rain with a mixed expression of respect and wonder.

"He's going to lose us the game!" muttered Jambe in my ear. "Can't you do something?"

I ran across the soggy green to Warg, who stared at me blankly when I implored him to come and take the penalty.

"It's raining," replied Warg, "and it's only a game. It doesn't *really* matter who wins, does it?"

"Stig?" I implored.

"We'd work in the rain for you, Thursday, but we've taken our turn already. Rain is precious; it gives life--you should respect it more, too."

I returned to the fifty-yard line as slowly as I could to try to give the

rain time to finish. It didn't.

"Well?" demanded Jambe.

I shook my head sadly. "I'm afraid not. Winning has never been of any interest to the neanderthals. They played only as a favor to me."

Aubrey sighed.

"We'd like to delay the next penalty until it stops raining," announced Twizzit, who had appeared holding a newspaper over his head. He was on legal marshland with this request, and he knew it. The umpire asked the Whackers if they wanted to delay, but O'Fathens stared at me and said that he didn't. So the next person on the list took her turn at the fifty-yard line--me.

I wiped the rain from my eyes and tried to even *see* the peg. The rain was coming down so heavily that the cascading droplets created a watery haze a few inches above the turf. Still, I had the second shot--O'Fathens might miss, too.

The Whackers' captain concentrated for a moment, swung and connected well. The ball went sailing high towards the peg and seemed set to hit it fairly and squarely. But with a loud *plop* it landed short. There was an expectant rumble from the crowd.

The word was relayed up the field--O'Fathens had landed four feet from the peg. I had to get closer than that to win the SuperHoop.

"Good luck," said Aubrey, giving my arm a squeeze.

I walked up to the fifty-yard line, the now muddy ground oozing around my boots. I removed my shoulder pads and cast them aside, made a few practice swings, wiped my eyes and stared at the multicolored peg that somehow seemed to have retreated another twenty yards. I squared up in front of the ball and shifted my weight to maintain the right poise. The crowd went silent. They didn't know how much was riding on this, but I did. I didn't dare miss. I looked at the ball, stared towards the peg, looked at the ball again, clasped the handle of my mallet and raised it high in the air, then swung hard into the ball, yelling out as the wood connected and the ball went sailing off in a gentle arc. I thought about Kaine and Goliath, of Landen and Friday and the consequences if I missed. The fate of all life on this beautiful planet decided on the swing of a croquet mallet. I watched as my ball plopped into the soggy ground and the groundsman dashed ahead to compare distances. I turned away and walked back through the rain towards Landen. I had done my best, and the game was over. I didn't hear the announcement, only a roar from the crowd. But

whose crowd? A flashbulb went off, and I felt dizzy as the sounds became muted and everything appeared to slow down. Not in the way that my father could engineer, but a postadrenaline moment when everything seems odd, and *other*. I searched the seating for Landen and Friday, but my attention was distracted by a large figure dressed in a duster coat and hat who had vaulted over the barrier and was running towards me. He drew something from his pocket as he ran, his feet throwing up great splashes of muddy water on his trousers. I stared at him as he came closer and noticed that his eyes were yellow and beneath his hat were what appeared to be--*horns*. I didn't see any more; there was a bright white flash, a deafening roar, and all the rest was silence.

## Second First Person

### Yacht Choice of Famed Literary Detective a Mystery

The shooting of Thursday Next last Saturday leaves the question of her favorite yacht unanswered, our Swindon correspondent writes. "From the look of her, I would expect a thirty-two-foot ketch, spinnaker-rigged and with a Floon automatic pilot." Other yachting commentators disagree and think she would have gone for something larger, such as a sloop or yawl, although it is possible she might only have wanted a boat for coastal day work or a long weekend, in which case she might have gone for a compact twenty-footer. We asked her husband to comment on her taste in sailing, but he declined to give an answer.

Article in *Yachting Monthly*, July 1988

I was watching her, right up to the moment she was shot. She looked confused and tired as she walked back from the penalty, and the crowd roared when I shouted to get her attention, so she didn't hear me. It was then that I saw a man vault across the barrier and run up to her. I thought it was a nutty fan or something, and the shot sounded more like a firecracker. There was a puff of blue smoke, and she looked incredulous for a moment, and then she just crumpled up and collapsed on the turf. As simple as that. Before I knew what I was doing, I had handed Friday to Joffy and jumped over the barrier, moving as fast as I could. I was the first one to reach Thursday, who was lying perfectly still on the muddy ground, her eyes open, a neat red hole two inches above her right eye.

Someone yelled, "Medic!" It was me.

I switched to automatic. For the moment the idea that someone had shot my wife was expunged from my mind; I was simply dealing with a casualty--and heaven knows I'd done that often enough. I pulled out my handkerchief and pressed it on the wound.

I said, "Thursday, can you hear me?"

She didn't answer. Her eyes were unblinking as the rain struck her, and I placed my hand above her head to shield her. A medic appeared at my side, sloshing down into the muddy ground in his haste to help.

He said, "What's happened?"

I said, "He shot her."

I reached gingerly around the back of her head and breathed a small sigh of relief when I couldn't find an exit wound.

A second medic--a woman this time--joined the first and told me to step aside. But I moved only far enough for her to work. I took hold of Thursday's hand.

The first medic said, "We've got a pulse," as he unwrapped an airway, then added, "Where's the blasted ambulance?"

I stayed with her all the way to the hospital and let go of her hand only when they took her into the operating theater.

A friendly casualty nurse at St. Septyk's said, "Here you go," as she gave me a blanket. I sat on a hard chair and stared at the wall clock and the public-information posters. I thought about Thursday, trying to figure out how much time we had spent together. Not long for two and a half years, really.

A boy next to me with his head stuck in a saucepan said, "Wot you in here for, mister?"

I leaned closer and spoke into the hollow handle so he could hear me and said, "I'm okay, but someone shot my wife."

The little boy with his head stuck in a saucepan said, "Bummer," and I replied, "Yes, bummer."

I sat and looked at the posters again for a long time until someone said, "Landen?"

I looked up. It was Mrs. Next. She had been crying. I think I had, too.

She said, "How is she?"

And I said, "I don't know."

She sat down next to me. "I brought you some Battenberg."

I said, "I'm not really that hungry."

"I know. But I just don't know what else to do."

We both stared at the clock and the posters in silence for some minutes. After a while I said, "Where's Friday?"

Mrs. Next patted my arm. "With Joffy and Miles."

"Ah," I said, "good."

Thursday came out of surgery three hours later. The doctor, who had a haggard look but stared me in the eye, which I liked, told me that things weren't terrific but she was stable and a fighter and I wasn't to give up hope. I went to have a look at her with Mrs. Next. There was a large bandage around her head, and the monitors did that beep thing they do in movies. Mrs. Next sniffed and said, "I've lost one son already. I don't want to lose another. Well, a daughter I mean, but you know what I mean, a child."

I said, "I know what you mean."

I didn't, having never lost a son, but it seemed the right thing to say.

We sat with her for two hours while the light failed outside and the fluorescents flickered on.

When we had been there another two hours, Mrs. Next said, "I'm going to go now, but I'll be back in the morning. You should try and get some sleep."

I said, "I know. I'm just going to stay here for another five minutes."

I stayed there for another hour. A kindly nurse brought me a cup of tea, and I ate some Battenberg. I got home at eleven. Joffy was waiting for me. He told me that he had put Friday to bed and asked me how his sister was.

I said, "It's not looking very good, Joff."

He patted me on the shoulder, gave me a hug and told me that everyone at the GSD had joined the Idolatry Friends of St. Zvlkx and the Sisters of Eternal Punctuality to pray for her, which was good of him, and them.

I sat on the sofa for a long time, until there was a gentle knock at the kitchen door. I opened it to find a small group of people. A man who introduced himself as Thursday's cousin Eddie but whispered that

actually his name was Hamlet said to me, "Is this a bad time? We heard about Thursday and wanted to tell you how sorry we were."

I tried to be cheery. I really wanted him to sod off, but instead I said, "Thank you. I don't mind at all. Friends of Thursday are friends of mine. Tea and Battenberg?"

"If it's not too much trouble."

He had three others with him. The first was a short man who looked *exactly* like a Victorian big-game hunter. He wore a pith helmet and safari suit and had a large bushy white mustache.

He gave me his hand to shake and said, "Commander Bradshaw, dontchaknow. Damn fine lady, your wife. Appreciate a girl who knows how to carry herself in a scrap. Did she tell you about the time she and I hunted Morlock in Trollope?"

"No."

"Shame. I'll tell you all about it one day. This is the memsahib, Mrs. Bradshaw."

Melanie was large and hairy and looked like a gorilla. In fact, she *was* a gorilla, but she had impeccable manners and curtsied as I shook her large coal black hand, which had the thumb in an odd place, so was difficult to shake properly. Her deep-set eyes were wet with tears, and she said, "Oh, Landen! Can I call you Landen? Thursday used to talk about you all the time when you were eradicated. We all loved her a great deal--I mean, we still do. How is she? How is Friday? You must feel awful!"

I said, "She's not really very well," which was the truth.

The third member of the party was a tall man dressed in black robes. He had a very large bald head and high arched eyebrows. He put out a finely manicured hand and said, "My name's Zhark, but you can call me Horace. I used to work with Thursday. You have my condolences. If it will help, I would happily slaughter a few thousand Thraals as a tribute to the gods."

I didn't know what a Thraal was but told him it really wasn't necessary. He said, "It's really no trouble. I've just conquered their planet, and I'm not sure what I should do with them."

I told him that this really, *really* wasn't necessary and added that I didn't think Thursday would have liked it, then cursed myself for using the past tense. I put on the kettle and said, "Battenberg?"

Hamlet and Zhark answered together. They were obviously quite keen on my mother-in-law's speciality. I smiled for the first time in eight hours and twenty-three minutes and said, "There's plenty for everyone. Mrs. Next keeps on sending it over, and the dodos won't touch it. You can take away a cake each."

I made the tea, Mrs. Bradshaw poured it, and there was an uncomfortable silence. Zhark asked if I knew where Handley Paige lived, but the big-game hunter gave him a stern look and he was quiet.

They all talked to me about Thursday and what she had done in the fictional BookWorld. The stories were all highly unbelievable, but I didn't think to question any of them--I was glad for the company and happy to hear about what she had been doing over the past two years. Mrs. Bradshaw gave me a rundown of what Friday had been up to as well and even offered to come and look after him whenever I wanted. Zhark was more interested in talking about Handley but still had time to tell me a wholly unbelievable story about how he and Thursday dealt with a Martian who had escaped from *The War of the Worlds* and turned up in *The Wind in the Willows*.

"It's a *W* thing," he explained, "in the titles, I mean. Wind-War, Worlds-Willows, they are so similar that--"

Bradshaw nudged him to be quiet.

They left two hours later, slightly full of drink and very full of Battenberg. I noticed the tall one in the black cloak had riffled through my address book before he left, and when I looked, he had left it open on Handley's address. I returned to the living room and sat on the sofa until sleep overcame me.

I was wakened by Pickwick wanting to be let out, and Alan wanting to be let in. The smaller dodo had some paint spilled on him, smelt of perfume, had a blue ribbon tied around his left foot and was holding a mackerel in his beak. I have no idea to this day what he'd been getting up to. I went upstairs, checked that Friday was sleeping in his cot, then had a long shower and a shave.



## Death Becomes Her

### SuperHoop Assailant "Vanishes"

The mysterious assassin who shot the Mallets' team manager has not yet been found, despite a vigorous SpecOps search. "It's still early days in the investigation," said a police spokesman, "but from clothes left at the crime scene we are interested in interviewing a Mr. Norman Johnson, whom we understand had been staying at the Finis Hotel for the past week." Asked to comment further on the rumored link between the attack on Miss Next and a grand piano incident last Friday, the same police spokesman confirmed that the attacks were connected, but wouldn't be pressed on details. Miss Next is still in St. Septyk's Hospital where her condition is reported as "critical."

Article in the *Swindon Daily Eyestrain*, July 24, 1988

Table seventeen?"

"Sorry?"

"Table seventeen. You are table seventeen, I take it?"

I looked up at the waitress in a confused manner. A second ago I had been taking a penalty during a SuperHoop--and now I was in a cafeteria somewhere. She was a kindly woman with a friendly manner. I looked at the table marker. I *was* table seventeen.

"Yes?"

"You're to go . . . *Northside*."

I must have looked confused, because she repeated it and then gave me directions: along the concourse, past the *Coriolanus* WillSpeak machine, up the stairs and across the pedestrian walkway.

I thanked her and got up. I was still dressed in my croquet gear, but

without mallet or helmet, and I touched my head gently where I could feel a small hole. I stopped for a moment and looked around. I had been here before, and recently. I was in a motorway services. The same one that I had visited with Spike. But where was Spike? And why couldn't I remember how I got here?

"Well, looky what we have here!" came a voice from behind me. It was Chesney, this time wearing some sort of neck brace, but with a bruise on the side of his head where I had kicked him. Next to him was one of his henchmen, who was minus an arm.

"Chesney," I muttered, looking around for a weapon, "still in the soul-reclamation business?"

"And how!"

"Touch me and I'll knock your block off."

"Ooooh!" said Chesney. "Don't flatter yourself, girlye--you've just been called to go Northside, haven't you?"

"So?"

"Well, there's only one reason you go over *there*," replied Chesney's sidekick with an unkindly laugh.

"You mean . . . ?"

"Right," said Chesney with a grin. "You're dead."

"Dead?"

"*Dead*. Join the club, sweetheart."

"How can I be dead?"

"Remember the assassin at the SuperHoop?"

I touched the hole in my head again. "I was shot."

"In the head. Get out of that one, Miss Next!"

"Landen must be devastated," I murmured, "and I have to take Friday for a health checkup on Tuesday."

"Ain't none of your concern no longer!" sneered Chesney's sidekick, and they walked off, laughing loudly.

I turned to the steps of the pedestrian footbridge that led towards the Northside and looked around. Oddly, I didn't feel any great fear about being dead--I just wished I'd had the chance to say good-bye to

the boys. I took the first step on the staircase when I heard a screeching of tires and a loud crash. A car had just pulled outside the services, jumped the curb and collided with a rubbish bin. A large man had leapt out and was running through the doors, looking up and down in desperation until he saw me. It was Spike.

"Thursday!" he gasped. "Thank heavens I got to you before you went across!"

"You're alive?"

"Of course. It took me two days of driving up and down the M4 to get here. Looks like I was just in time."

"In time? In time for what?"

"I'm taking you home."

He gave me his car keys.

"That's the ignition, but the engine starter is a pushbutton in the middle of the dash."

"Middle of the dash, okay. What about you?"

"I've got some unfinished business with Chesney, so I'll see you on the other side."

He gave me a hug and trotted off towards the newsagents'.

I walked outside and got into Spike's car, grateful that I had a friend like him who knew how to deal with things like this. I'd be seeing Friday and Landen again, and everything would be just hunky-dory. I pressed the starter, reversed off the rubbish bin and drove towards the exit. I wondered if we'd won the SuperHoop. I should have asked Spike. *SPIKE!!!*

I stomped on the brakes and reversed rapidly back to the services, jumped out of the car and ran across the footbridge leading to the Northside of the Dauntsey services.

Only it wasn't the Northside, of course. It was a large cavern of incalculable age lit by dozens of burning torches. The stalactites and stalagmites had joined, giving the impression of organic Doric columns supporting the high roof, and snaking amongst the columns and the boulder-strewn floor was an orderly queue of departed souls who had lined up ready to cross the river that guarded the entrance to the underworld. The lone ferryman was doing a brisk trade; for an

extra shilling, you could be taken on a guided tour on the way. Another entrepreneur was selling guides to the underworld: how best to ensure that the departed soul went to a land of milk of honey and, for the more dubious characters, a few helpful hints on how to square yourself with the Big Guy on Judgment Day.

I ran up the queue and found Spike ten souls from the front.

"*Absolutely* no way, Spike!"

"Shhh!" said someone ahead of us.

"Nuts to you, Thursday. Just look after Betty, would you?"

"You are *not* taking my place, Spike."

"Let me do this, Thursday. You deserve a long life. You have many wonderful things in front of you."

"So do you."

"It's debatable. Battling the undead was never a bowl of cherries. And without Cindy?"

"She's not dead, Spike."

"If she pulls through they'll never let her out of jail. She was the Windowmaker. No, after the shit I've been through, this actually seems like a good option. I'm staying."

"You are not."

"Try and stop me."

"Shhh!" said the man in front again.

"I won't let you do it, Spike. Think of Betty. Besides, I'm the one that's dead, not you. SECURITY!"

A moldy skeleton holding a lance and dressed in rusty armor clanked up. "What's going on here?"

I stabbed a finger at Spike. "This man's not dead."

"Not dead?" replied the guard in a shocked tone. The queue of people all turned around to stare as the guard drew a rusty sword and pointed it at Spike, who reluctantly raised his hands and, head shaking sadly, walked back towards the footbridge.

"Tell Landen and Friday I love them!" I yelled at his departing form, suddenly realizing that I should have asked him who'd won the

SuperHoop. I turned to the queue behind me that snaked amongst the boulder-strewn cavern and said, "Does anyone know the results of SuperHoop-88?"

"Shhh!" said the man in front again.

"Why don't you poke your 'shhh' up your--Oh. Hello, Mr. President."

As soon as he recognized me, Formby gave me a broad toothy grin. "Eeee, Miss Next! Is this that theme park again?"

"Sort of."

I was glad that the trip across the river led up as well as down. One thing was for sure: unless there had been some sort of dreadful administrative mix-up, Formby was certainly *not* bound for eternal torment within the all-consuming flames of hell.

"So . . . how are you?" I asked, momentarily lost for words when confronted with the biggest--and last--celebrity I would be likely to meet.

"Pretty good, lass. One moment I was giving a concert, next thing I was in the cafeteria ordering pie and chips for one."

Spike had said he'd driven for two days to get to me, so it must be the twenty-fourth--and, as Dad had predicted, Formby had died as he had been meant to, performing for the Lancaster Regiment Veterans. My heart fell as I realized that the days following Formby's death would mark the beginning of World War III. Still, it was out of my hands now.

The boat arrived for the ex-President, and he stepped in. The ferryman pushed the small craft into the limpid waters of the river and dropped his pole into the dark waters.

"Mr. Formby, isn't it?" said the ferryman. "I'm a big fan of yours. I had that Mr. Garrick in the back of my boat once. Do you do requests?"

"Ooh, aye," replied the entertainer, "but I don't have me uke with me."

"Borrow mine," said the ferryman. "I do a bit of entertaining myself, you know."

Formby picked up the ukulele and strummed the strings. "What would you like?"

The ferryman told him, and the dour cavern was soon filled with a

chirpy rendition of "We've Been a Long Time Gone." It seemed a fitting way to go for the old man who had given so much to so many--not only as an entertainer but as freedom fighter and elder statesman. The boat, Formby and the ferryman disappeared into the mist that drifted across the river, obscuring the far bank and muting the sound. It was my turn next. What had Gran said? The worst bit about dying is not knowing how it all turns out? Still, at least I'd got Landen back, so Friday was in good hands.

"Miss Next?"

I looked up. The ferryman had returned. He was dressed in a sort of dirty muslin cloth; I couldn't see his face.

"You have the fare?"

I dug out a coin and was about to hand it over when--

"WAIT!!!"

I turned around as a petite young woman trotted up, out of breath. She brushed the blond hair from her face and smiled shyly at me. It was Cindy.

"I'm taking her place," she told the ferryman, handing over a coin.

"How can you?" I said in some surprise. "You're almost dead yourself!"

"No," she corrected me, "I'm not. And what's more, I pull through. I shouldn't, but I do. Sometimes the devil looks after his own."

"But you'll leave Spike and Betty--"

"Listen to me for a moment, Thursday. I've killed sixty-eight people in my career."

"So you *did* do Samuel Pring."

"It was a fluke. But listen: sixty-eight innocent souls sent across this river before their time, all down to me. And I did it all for cash. You can play the self-righteous card for all I care, but the fact remains that I'll never see the light of day when I recover, and I'll never get to hold Betty again, or hug Spike. I don't want that. You're a better person than me, Thursday, and the world is far better off with you in it."

"But that's not the point, surely?" I asked. "When it's time to go--"

"Look," she interrupted angrily, "let me do *one good thing* to make up for even one-quarter of one percent of the misery I've caused."

I stared at her as the skeleton in rusty armor clanked up again. "More trouble, Miss Next?"

"Give us a minute, will you?"

"*Please*," implored Cindy. "You'd be doing me a favor."

I looked at the skeleton, who probably would have rolled his eyes if he had any.

"It's your decision, Miss Next," said the guard, "but *someone* has to take that boat or I'm out of a job--and I've got a bony wife and two small skeletons to put through college."

I turned back to Cindy, put out my hand and she shook it, then pulled me forward and hugged me tightly while whispering in my ear, "Thank you, Thursday. Keep an eye on Spike for me."

She hopped quickly into the boat before I had a chance to change my mind. She gave a wan smile and sat in the bows as the ferryman leaned on his pole, sending the small boat noiselessly across the river. Against the burden of her sins, saving me was only small recompense, but she felt better for it, and so did I. As the boat containing Cindy faded into the mists of the river, I turned and walked back towards the pedestrian footbridge, the Southside of the Dauntsey services--and life.

## Explanations

### State Funeral Attracts World's Leaders

Millions of heartbroken citizens of England and the most important world leaders arrived in Wigan yesterday to pay tribute to President George Formby, who died two weeks ago. The funeral cortege was driven on a circuitous route of the Midlands, the streets lined with mourners, eager to bid a final good-bye to England's President of the past thirty-nine years. At the memorial service in Wigan Cathedral, the new Chancellor, Mr. Redmond van de Poste, spoke warmly of the great man's contribution to world peace. After the Lancashire Male Voice Choir sang "With My Little Stick of Blackpool Rock," accompanied by two hundred ukuleles, the Chancellor invited the Queen of Denmark to sing with him a duet of "Your Way Is My Way," something that "might well serve to patch the rift between our respective nations."

Article in *The Toad*, August 4, 1988

It was touch and go for a moment," said Landen, who was sitting by my hospital bed holding my hand. "There was a moment when we really didn't think you'd make it."

I gave a wan smile. I had regained consciousness only the day before, and every movement felt like daggers in my head. I looked around. Joffy and Miles and Hamlet were there, too. "Hi, guys."

They smiled and welcomed me back.

"How long?" I asked in a whisper.

"Two weeks," said Landen. "We really thought . . . thought--"

I gently squeezed his hand and looked around.

Land divined my thoughts perfectly. "He's with his grand-mother."



I raised a hand to touch the side of my head but could feel only a heavy bandage. Landen took my hand and returned it to the sheet.

"What . . . ?"

"You were astonishingly lucky," he said in a soothing tone. "The doctors say you'll make a full recovery. The caliber was quite small, and it entered your skull obliquely; by the time it had gone through, most of the energy was gone." He tapped the side of his head. "It lodged between your brain and the inside of the skull. Gave us quite a fright, though."

"Cindy died, didn't she?"

Joffy answered. "Looked to be improving, but then septicemia set in."

"They really loved one another, you know, despite their differences."

"She was a hit woman, Thursday, a trained assassin. I don't think she regarded death as anything more than an occupational hazard."

I nodded. He was right.

Landen leaned forwards and kissed my nose.

"Who shot me, Land?"

"Does the name 'Norman Johnson' mean anything to you?"

"Yes," I said. "The Minotaur. You were right. He'd been trying to slapstick me to death all week--steamroller, banana skin, piano--I was a fool not to see it. Mind you, a gun's hardly slapstick, is it?"

Landen smiled.

"It had a large BANG sign that came out of the barrel, as well as the bullet. The police are still trying to make sense of it."

I sighed. The Minotaur was long gone but I'd still have to be careful. I turned to Landen. There was still something I needed to know.

"Did we win?"

"Of course. You pegged a foot closer than O'Fathens. Your shot has been voted Sporting Moment of the Century--in Swindon, at any rate."

"So we aren't at war with Wales?"

Landen shook his head and smiled. "Kaine's finished, my darling--and Goliath has abandoned all attempts to become a religion. St.

Zvlkx does indeed work in mysterious ways."

"Are you going to tell me?" I said with a wan smile. "Or do I have to beat it out of you with a stick?"

Joffy unfolded the picture of St. Zvlkx and Cindy's fatal pianoing on Commercial Road, the one from the *Swindon Evening Globe* that Gran had given me.

"We found this in your back pocket," said Miles,

"And it got us to thinking," continued Joffy, "exactly *where* Zvlkx was heading that morning and why he had the ticket for the Gravitube in his bedroom. He was cutting his losses and running. I don't think even Zvlkx--or whoever he was--believed that Swindon could possibly win the SuperHoop. Dad had always said that time wasn't immutable."

"I don't get it."

Miles leaned forward and showed me the picture again. "He died trying to get to Tudor Turf Accounting."

"So? Oldest betting shop in Swindon."

"No--in the *world*. We made a few calls. It had been trading continually since 1264."

I looked at Joffy quizzically. "What are you saying?"

"That the Book of Revealments was nothing of the kind--*it's a thirteenth-century betting slip!*"

"A what?"

He pulled Zvlkx's Revealments from his pocket and opened it to the front page. There was a countersigned receipt for a farthing that we had thought was a bookbinder's tax or something. The small arithmetical sum next to each revealment was actually the odds against that particular event's coming true, each one countersigned by the same signature as on the front page. Joffy flicked through the slim volume.

"The Spanish Armada revealment had been given the odds of 600-1, Wellington's victory at Waterloo 420-1." He flicked to the final page. "The outcome of the croquet match was set at 124,000-1. The odds were generous because Zvlkx was betting on things centuries before they happened--indeed, centuries before croquet was even *thought* of. No wonder the person who had underwritten the bet felt confident to offer such odds."

"Well," I said, "don't hold your breath. A hundred twenty-four thousand farthings only adds up to . . . up to . . ."

"One hundred and thirty quid," put in Miles.

"Right. One hundred and thirty quid. Nelson's victory would net Zvlkx only--what? Nine bob?"

I still didn't quite get it.

"Thursday--it's a *totalizer*. Each bet or event that comes true is multiplied by the winnings of the previous event--and any prophecy that didn't come true would have negated the whole deal."

"So . . . how much are the revealments worth?"

Joffy looked at Miles, who looked at Landen, who grinned and looked at Joffy.

"One hundred and twenty-eight *billion* pounds."

"But Tudor Turf wouldn't have that sort of cash!"

"Of course not," replied Miles, "but the parent company that underwrites Tudor Turf would be legally bound to meet all bets drawn up. And Tudor Turf is owned by Wessex Cashcow, which is itself owned by Tails You Lose, the wholly owned gaming division of Consolidated Glee, which is owned by--"

"The Goliath Corporation," I breathed.

"Right."

There was a stunned silence. I wanted to jump out of bed and laugh and scream and run around, but that, I knew, would have to be postponed until I was in better health. For now I just smiled.

"So how much of Goliath does the Idolatry Friends of St. Zvlkx actually own?"

"Well," continued Joffy, "it doesn't *actually* own any of it. If you recall, we sold all his wisdom to the Toast Marketing Board. *They* now own fifty-eight percent of Goliath. We told them what we wanted, and they wholeheartedly agreed. Goliath has dropped its plans to become a religion and decided to support another political party other than the Whigs. There was something in the deal about a new cathedral to be built, too. We won, Thursday--*we won!*"

Kaine's fall, I discovered, had been rapid and humiliating. Once he

was without Goliath's backing and minus his Ovinator, parliament suddenly started wondering why they had been following him so blindly, and those who had supported him turned against him with the same enthusiasm. In less than a week he realized just what it was to be human. All the vanity and plotting and conniving that worked so well for him when fictional didn't seem to have the same power at all when spoken with a real tongue, and he was removed from office within three days of the SuperHoop. Ernst Stricknene, questioned at length over calls made to Cindy Stoker from his office, decided to save as much of his skin as he could and talked at great length about his former boss. Kaine now had to face the biggest array of indictments ever heaped upon a public figure in the history of England. So many, in fact, that it was easier to list the offenses he *wasn't* indicted for--which were: "working as an unlicensed nanny" and "using a car horn in a built-up area during the hours of darkness." If found guilty on all charges, he was facing more than nine hundred years in prison.

"I almost feel sorry for him," said Joffy, who was a lot more forgiving than I. "Poor Yorrick."

"Yes," replied Hamlet sarcastically, "alas."

## Recovery

### Toast Party Unveils Manifesto

Mr. Redmond van de Poste, whose ruling Toast (formerly Commonsense) Party took control of the nation last week, announced the party's manifesto to raise the country from economic and social collapse. Mr. van de Poste began by announcing mandatory toast-eating requirements for all citizens on a sliding scale based on age, then proposed a drive to place a new toaster in every home within a year. "In the long term," continued Mr. van de Poste, "we will instigate a five-year plan to upgrade all our manufacturing facilities to build a new brand of supertoaster that will sweep aside all competition and make England the toast capital of the world." Critics of the Toast manifesto indicated alarm at Poste's strident calls for a North Atlantic Toast Alliance, and pointed out that by excluding non-toast-eating nations it would create unnecessary international tension. Mr. van de Poste has not yet responded, and has called for a reform of parliament.

Article in *The Toad*, August 4, 1988

I went home two weeks later to a house that was so full of flowers it looked like Kew Gardens. I still didn't have complete command of the right-hand side of my body but every day it seemed a little bit more like part of me, a little less numb. I sat and looked out the open French windows into the garden. The air was heavy with the scents of summer and the breeze gently played upon the net curtains. Friday was drawing with some crayons on the floor and I could hear the *clacketty-clack* of Landen's old Underwood typewriter next door, and in the kitchen Louis Armstrong was on the wireless singing "La Vie en Rose." It was the first time I had been able to relax for almost as long as I could remember. I was going to need an extended convalescence but would go back to work eventually--perhaps at SpecOps, perhaps at Jurisfiction, perhaps both.

"I came to say good-bye."

It was Hamlet. I had learned from him earlier that William Shgakespeare had managed to extricate *Hamlet* from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and both plays were as they should be. The one enigmatic, the other a spin-off.

"Are you sure you're--"

He silenced me with a wave of his hand and sat down on the sofa while Alan gazed at him adoringly.

"I've learned a lot of things while I've been here," he said. "I've learned that there are many Hamlets, and we love each one of them for their different interpretation. I liked Gibson's because it has the least amount of dithering, Orson because he did it with the best voice, Gielgud for the ease in which he placed himself within the role and Jacobi for his passion. By the way, have you heard of this Branagh fellow?"

"No."

"He's just starting to get going. I've got a feeling his Hamlet will be stupendous."

He thought for a moment.

"For centuries I've been worrying about audiences seeing me as a mouthy spoiled brat who can't make up his mind about anything, but, having seen the real world, I can understand the appeal. My play is popular because my failings are *your* failings, my indecision the indecision of you all. We all know what has to be done; it's just that sometimes we don't know how to get there. Acting without thought doesn't really help in the long run. I might dither for a while, but at least I make the right decision in the end: I bear my troubles *and* take arms against them. And thereby lies a message for all mankind, although I'm not *exactly* sure what it is. Perhaps there's no message. I don't really know. Besides, if I don't dither, there's no play."

"So you're not going to kill your uncle in the first act?"

"No. In fact, I'm going to leave the play exactly as it is. I've decided instead to focus my energies towards being the Jurisfiction agent for all of Shakespeare's works. I'll have a go at Marlowe, too--but I'm not keen on Webster."

"That's excellent news," I told him. "Jurisfiction will be very happy."

He paused. "I'm still a bit annoyed that someone told Ophelia about

Emma. It wasn't you, was it?"

"On my honor."

He got up, bowed and kissed my hand. "Come and visit me, won't you?"

"You can count on it," I replied. "Just one question: where on earth did you find Daphne Farquitt? She's the recluse's recluse."

He grinned. "I didn't. By the morning of the SuperHoop, I had managed to gather about nine people. There's a limit to how much anti-Kaine sentiment you can muster going door to door in Swindon at two in the morning."

"So there never was a Farquitt Fan Club?"

"Oh, I'm sure there is somewhere, but Kaine didn't know it, now, did he?"

I laughed. "I've a feeling you're going to be an asset to Jurisfiction, Hamlet. And I want you to take something with you as a gift from me."

"A gift? I don't think I've ever had one of those before."

"No? Well, always a first for everything. I want you to have . . . Alan."

"The dodo?"

"I think he'd be an invaluable addition to Elsinore Castle--just don't let him get into the main story."

Hamlet looked at Alan, who looked back at him longingly.

"Thank you," he said with as much sincerity as he could. "I'm deeply honored."

Alan went a bit floppy as Hamlet picked him up, and a few moments later they both vanished back to Elsinore, Hamlet to further continue his work as a career procrastinator, and Alan to cause trouble in the Danish court.

"Hello, Sweetpea."

"Hi, Dad."

"You did a terrific job over that SuperHoop. How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good."

"Did I tell you that as soon as Zvlkx got hit by that Number 23 bus, the Ultimate Likelihood Index of that Armageddon rose to eighty-three percent?"

"No, you never told me that."

"Just as well really--I wouldn't have wanted you to panic."

"Dad, who *was* St. Zvlkx?"

He leaned closer. "Don't tell a soul, but he was someone named Steve Schultz of the Toast Marketing Board. I think I might have recruited him, or he might have approached me to help--I'm not sure. History has rewritten itself so many times I'm really not sure how it was to begin with--it's a bit like trying to guess the original color of a wall when it's been repainted eight times. All I can say is that everything turned out okay--and that things are far weirder than we *can* know. But the main thing is that Goliath now answers to the Toast Marketing Board and Kaine is out of power. The whole thing has been rubber-stamped into historical fact, and that's the way it's going to stay."

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"How did you manage to jump Schultz or Zvlkx or whoever he was all the way from the thirteenth century without the ChronoGuard spotting what you were up to?"

"Where do you hide a pebble, Sweetpea?"

"On a beach."

"And where do you hide a thirteenth-century impostor saint?"

"With . . . lots of other thirteenth-century impostor saints?"

He smiled.

"You sent all twenty-eight of them forward just to hide St. Zvlkx?"

"Twenty-seven, actually--one of them *was* real. But I didn't do it alone. I needed someone to whip up a timephoon in the Dark Ages as cover. Someone with remarkable skills as a time traveler. An expert who can surf the time line with a skill I will never possess."

"Me?"



He chuckled. "No, silly--*Friday*."

The little boy looked up when he heard his name and chewed a crayon, made a face and spat the bits on Pickwick, who jumped up in fright and ran away to hide.

"Meet the future head of the ChronoGuard, Sweetpea. How did you think he survived Landen's eradication?"

I stared at the little boy, who stared back, and smiled.

Dad looked at his watch. "Well, I've got to go. Nelson's up to his old tricks again. Time waits for no man, as we say."

## Final Curtain

### Neanderthals Make New Year's "At Risk" List

Neanderthals, the once extinct cousins of *Homo sapien*, were yesterday granted "at risk" status along with the Edible Dormouse and Poorly Crested Grebe. Incoming Chancellor Mr. Redmond van de Poste of the Toast Party granted them this honor as recognition of their work during the Swindon-Reading SuperHoop. Mr. van de Poste met with neanderthals and read from a specially prepared speech. "Personally, I really don't give a button over your status," he told them, "but it's politically expedient and vote-winning to be doing something to help lowly clods like you gain some sort of limited freedom." His speech was received warmly by the neanderthals, who were expecting half-truths and disinformation. "An application to become 'endangered,' " continued Mr. van de Poste, "will be looked at on its merits in the New Year--if we can be bothered."

Article in the *Swindon Daily Eyestrain*, September 7, 1988

I was well enough to be given an award three weeks later at a mayoral lunch. Lord Volescampa presented the whole SuperHoop team with a special "Swindon Star" medal, especially struck for the purpose. The only neanderthal to show up was Stig, who understood what it meant to me, even if he couldn't truly understand the concept of individual aggrandizement.

There was a party afterwards, and everyone wanted to chat to me, mostly to ask me if I would play any more professional croquet. I met Handley Paige again, who jumped when he saw me and downed a drink nervously.

"I've decided not to kill off my Emperor Zhark character," he announced quickly. "I'd just like to make that point right now, in case anyone might think I was going to stop writing Zhark books, which

I'm not. Not at all. Not ever." He looked around nervously.

"I'm sorry?" I said. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Oh . . . right," he replied sarcastically, tried to drink from his empty glass and then strode off to the bar.

"What was all that about?" asked Landen.

"Search me."

Spike was at the party, too, and he sidled up to me as I was fetching another drink.

"What did she say to you when she took your place?"

I turned to face him; I wasn't surprised that he knew Cindy had replaced me. The semidead was his field of expertise, after all.

"She said that she wanted to make up for some of the misery she had caused, and she knew she would never hold either you or Betty again."

"You could have refused her, but I'm glad you didn't. I loved her, but she was rotten to the core."

He fell silent for a moment and I touched him on the arm.

"Not entirely rotten, Spike. She loved you both very much."

He looked at me and smiled.

"I know. You did the right thing, Thursday. Thank you."

And he hugged me, and was gone.

I answered lots more questions regarding the SuperHoop match, and when I decided enough was enough, I asked Landen to take me home.

We drove towards home in the Speedster, Landen driving and Friday in a baby seat in the back, right next to Pickwick, who didn't want to be left alone now that Alan had gone.

"Land?"

"Mmm?"

"Did you ever think it odd that I survived?"

"I'm grateful that you did, of course--"

"Stop the car a minute."

"Why?"

"Just do as I say."

He pulled up, and I very carefully climbed out and walked towards where two familiar figures were sitting on the pavement outside a Goliath Coffee Shop. I approached silently and sat down next to the larger of the two before he'd even noticed. He looked around and jumped visibly when he saw me.

"Once," said a sad and familiar voice, "you would never have been able to sneak up on a Gryphon!"

I smiled. He was a creature with the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion. He wore spectacles and a scarf under his trench coat, which somewhat dented his otherwise fearsome appearance. He was fictional, to be sure, but he was also head of Jurisdiction's legal team, my lawyer--and a friend.

"Gryphon!" I said with some surprise. "What are you doing in the Outland?"

"Here to see you," he whispered, looking around and lowering his voice. "Have you met Mock Turtle? He's now my number two at the legal desk."

He gestured towards where a turtle with the head of a calf was staring mournfully into space. He was, like the Gryphon, straight out of the pages of *Alice in Wonderland*.

"How do you do?"

"Okay--I suppose," sighed the Mock Turtle, dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief.

"So what's up?" I asked.

"It's quite serious--too serious for the footnoterphone. And I needed an excuse to do some Outlander research on traffic islands. Fascinating things."

I felt hot and prickly all of a sudden. Not about traffic islands, of course, about my *conviction*. The Fiction Infraction. I had changed the ending of *Jane Eyre* and was found guilty by the Court of Hearts. All that was missing was the sentence.

"What did I get?"

"It's not that bad!" exclaimed the Gryphon, snapping his fingers at the Mock Turtle, who passed him a sheet of paper now stained with his own tears.

I took the paper and scanned the semiblurred contents.

"It's a bit unusual," admitted the Gryphon. "I think the bit about the gingham is unnaturally cruel--might be the cause of an appeal on its own."

I stared at the paper. "Twenty years of my life in blue gingham," I murmured.

"And you can't die until you've read the ten most boring books," added the Gryphon.

"My gran had to do the same," I explained, feeling just a little puzzled.

"Not possible," said the Mock Turtle, drying his eyes. "This sentence is unique, as befits the crime. You can take the twenty years of gingham anytime you want--not necessarily now."

"But my gran had this punishment--"

"You're mistaken," replied the Gryphon firmly, retrieving the paper, folding it and placing it in his pocket, "and we had better be off. Will you be at Bradshaw's golden wedding anniversary?"

"Y-es," I said slowly, still confused.

"Good. Page 221, *Bradshaw and the Diamond of M'shala*. It's bring-a-bottle-and-a-banana. Drag your husband along. I know he's real, but no one's perfect--we'd all like to meet him."

"Thank you. What about--"

"Goodness!" said the Gryphon, consulting a large pocket-watch. "Is that the time? We've got a lobster quadrille to perform in ten pages!"

The Mock Turtle cheered up a bit when he heard this, and in a moment they were gone.

I walked slowly back to where Landen and Friday were waiting for me in the car.

"Dah!" said Friday really loudly.

"There!" said Landen. "He most definitely said 'Dad!'" He noticed my

furrowed brow. "What's up?"

"Landen, my gran on my mother's side died in 1968."

"And?"

"Well, if she died then, and Dad's mum died in 1979 . . ."

"Yes?"

*"Then who is that up at the Goliath Twilight Homes?"*

"I've never met her," explained Landen. "I thought 'Gran' was a term of endearment."

I didn't answer. I had thought she was my gran but she wasn't. In fact, I'd known her only about three years. Before that I had never set eyes on her before. Perhaps that's less than accurate. I had seen her whenever I stared into a mirror, but she had been a lot younger. Gran wasn't my gran. *Gran was me.*

Landen drove me up to the Goliath Twilight Homes, and I went in alone, leaving Landen and Friday in the car. I made my way with heavily beating heart to her room and found the ward sister bending over the gently dozing form of the old, old woman that I would eventually become.

"Is she suffering much?"

"The painkillers keep it under control," replied the nurse. "Family?"

"Yes," I replied, "we're very close."

"She's a remarkable woman," murmured the nurse. "It's a wonder she's still with us at all."

"It was a punishment," I said.

"Pardon?"

"Never mind. It won't be long now."

I moved closer to the bed, and she opened her eyes.

"Hello, young Thursday!" said Gran, waving at me weakly. She took off the oxygen mask, was roundly scolded by the nurse and put it back on again.

"You're not my gran, are you?" I said slowly, sitting on the bedside.

She smiled benevolently and placed her small and pink wrinkled hand on mine.

"I *am* Granny Next," she replied, "just not yours. When did you find out?"

"I got my sentencing from the Gryphon just now."

Now that I knew, she seemed more familiar to me than ever before. I even noticed the small scar on her chin, from the Charge of the Armored Brigade way back in '72, and the well-healed scar above her eye.

"Why did I never realize?" I asked her in confusion. "My *real* grandmothers are both dead--and I always knew that."

The tired old woman smiled again. "You don't have Aornis in one's head without learning a *few* tricks, my dear. My time with you has not been wasted. Our husband would not have survived without it, and Aornis could have erased everything when we were living in *Caversham Heights*. Where is he, by the way?"

"He's looking after the boy Friday outside."

"Ah!"

She looked into my eyes for a moment, then said, "Will you tell him I love him?"

"Of course."

"Well, now that you know who I am, I think it's time to go. I *did* find the ten most boring classics--and I've almost finished the last."

"I thought you had to have an 'epiphanic moment' before you departed? A last exciting resolution to your life?"

"This is it, young Thursday. But it's not mine, it's *ours*. Now, pick up that copy of *Faerie Queen*. I am one hundred and ten, and it is well past my out time."

I looked across at the table and picked up the book. I had never read the end--nor even past page 40. It was that dull.

"Don't *you* have to read it?" I asked.

"Me, you, what's the difference?" She giggled, something that turned into a weak cough that wouldn't stop until I had leaned her gently upright.

"Thank you, my dear!" she gasped when the fit had passed. "There is

only a paragraph to go. The page is marked."

I opened the book but didn't want to read the text. My eyes filled with tears, and I looked at the old woman, only to be met by a soft smile.

"It is time," she said simply, "but I envy you--you have so many wonderful years ahead of you! Read, please."

I wiped away my tears and had a sudden thought.

"But if I read this now," I began slowly, "then when *I* am one hundred and ten years old, I will *already* have read it, and then I'd be--you know--just before the last sentence before I . . . that is, the younger me . . ." I paused, thinking about the seemingly impossible paradox.

"Dear Thursday!" said the old woman kindly, "always so *linear*! It does work, believe me. Things are just so much weirder than we *can* know. You'll find out in due course, as I did."

She smiled benignly, and I opened the book.

"Is there anything you need to tell me?"

She smiled again.

"No, my dear. Some things are best left unsaid. You and Landen will have a wonderful time together, mark my words. Read on, young Thursday!"

There was a ripple, and my father was standing on the other side of the bed.

"Dad!" said the old woman. "Thank you for coming!"

"I wouldn't miss it, oh, daughter-my-daughter," he said softly, bending down to kiss her on the forehead and hold her hand. "I've brought a few people with me."

And there he was, the young man whom I had seen with Lavoisier at my wedding party. He laid a hand on hers and kissed her.

"Friday!" said the old woman. "How old are your children at the moment?"

"Here, Mum. Ask them yourself!"

And there they were, next to Friday's wife, whom he had yet to meet. She was a one-year-old somewhere, with no idea of her future either. There were two children with her. Two grandchildren of mine,



who had yet to be even thought of, let alone born. I continued reading *Faerie Queen*, slowly pacing myself as more people rippled in to see the old woman before she left.

"Tuesday!" said the old woman as another person appeared. It was my daughter. We'd vaguely talked about her, but that was all--and here she was, a sprightly sixty-year-old. She had brought her children, too, and one of them had brought hers.

In all, I think I saw twenty-eight descendants of mine that afternoon, all of them somber and only one of them yet born. When they had said their good-byes and rippled from sight, other visitors appeared to see her. There was Emperor and Empress Zhark, and Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw, who were never to age at all. The Cheshire Cat came, too, and several Miss Havishams, as well as a delegation of lobsters from the distant future, a large man smoking a cigar and several other people who rippled in and out in a polite manner. I carried on reading, holding her other hand as the fire of life slowly faded from her tired body. By the time I had started on the final verse of *Faerie Queen*, her eyes were closed and her breathing was shallow. The last of the guests had gone, and only my father and I were left.

I finished the verse, and my sentence was complete. Twenty years of gingham and ten boring books. I closed the volume and laid it on the bed next to her. Already her face had drained of color, and her mouth was partly open. I was alerted by a quiet sniffle next to me. I had never seen my father cry before, but even now large tears rolled silently down his cheeks. He thanked me and departed, leaving me alone with the woman in the bed, the nurse discreetly waiting at the door. I felt sad in that I had lost a valued companion, but no great sense of grief. After all, I was still very much alive. I had learned from my own father's death many years ago that the end of one's life and dying are two very different things indeed, and took solace in that.

"Are you okay?" asked Landen when I got back to the car. "You look as though you've seen a ghost!"

"Several," I replied. "I think I just saw my whole life pass in front of my eyes."

"Do I feature?"

"Quite a lot, Land."

"I had my life flash in front of me once," he said. "Trouble is, I blinked and missed all the good bits."

"It will need more than a blink," I told him, nuzzling his ear. "How's

the little man?"

"Tired after a lot of pointing."

I looked into the backseat. Friday was spark out and snoring.

Landen started the car and pulled out of the parking space.

"Who was the old woman, by the way?" he asked as we turned into the main road. "You never did tell me."

I thought for a moment. "Someone who knew me really well and turned up when it mattered."

"I have someone like that," said Landen, "and if she's feeling up to it, I'd like to take her out for dinner. Where do you fancy?"

I thought of the old woman in the bed, dressed in gingham, hanging on for the last verse, and all the people who had come to see her off. Life, I decided, would be good and, more than that, *unusual*.

"If I'm with you," I told him tenderly, "SmileyBurger is the Ritz."

## Credits

My great thanks to Maggy and Stewart Roberts for the illustrations in this book.

My thanks to Mari Roberts for huge quantities of research on everything from the Danes to Hamlet to conflict resolution and the piano gag, and for companionship, and love.  
Mr. Shgakespeare's quotes and Hamlet kindly supplied by Shakespeare (William), Inc.

Lorem Ipsum usage suggested by Swaim & Rogan.  
For the purposes of this narrative, it should be noted that Zeffirelli's excellent version of *Hamlet* starring Mel Gibson and Glenn Close was made in 1987, not 1991 as previously thought.

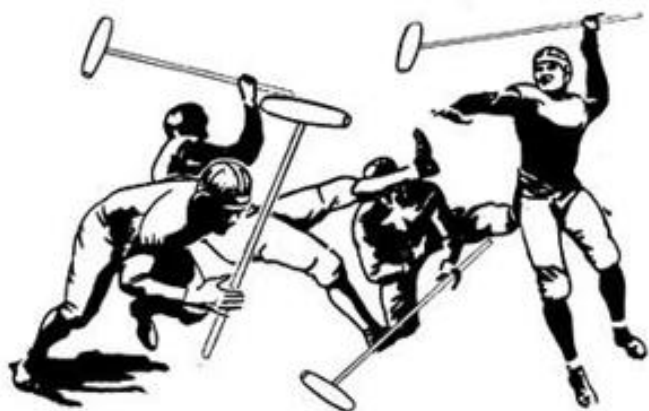
My grateful thanks to John Sutherland and Cedric Watts for their *Puzzles in Literature* series, which continues to amuse and delight, and to Norrie Epstein for her excellent *Friendly Shakespeare*, which is every bit as the title suggests. Also to the Reduced Shakespeare Company for much-needed Bard-related tomfoolery in times of stress.  
Pulp western research by Gillian Taylor, author of *Darrow's Word* and many others.  
Visit [www.gillian-f-taylor.co.uk](http://www.gillian-f-taylor.co.uk).

My grateful thanks to Landen Parke-Laine for being willing to undertake a guest first-person appearance at short notice.  
No penguins were killed or pianos destroyed in order to write this book. The penguin meal on page 146 and the piano incident on page 305 were merely fictional narrative devices and have no basis in fact.  
My apologies also to Danish people everywhere for the fictional slur undertaken in the pages of this book. I am at pains to point out that this was for satirical

purposes only,  
and I like Denmark a lot, especially rollmops, bacon, Lego, Bang &  
Olufsen, the  
Faeroes, Karen Blixen--and, of course, Hamlet, the greatest Dane of all.

**Mandatory toast information, as required by current toast  
legislation:** Bread was  
originated in a Panasonic SD206 breadmaker, sliced with an IKEA  
bread knife on a  
homemade breadboard and toasted in a Dualit model 3CBGB. Spread  
was Utterly  
Butterly, and Seville marmalade was homemade.  
The appearances of Zhark in this book and the use of his name and  
exploits were  
monitored and approved by Zhark Enterprises, Inc., and we gratefully  
acknowledge  
the Emperor's help and assistance in the making of this novel.  
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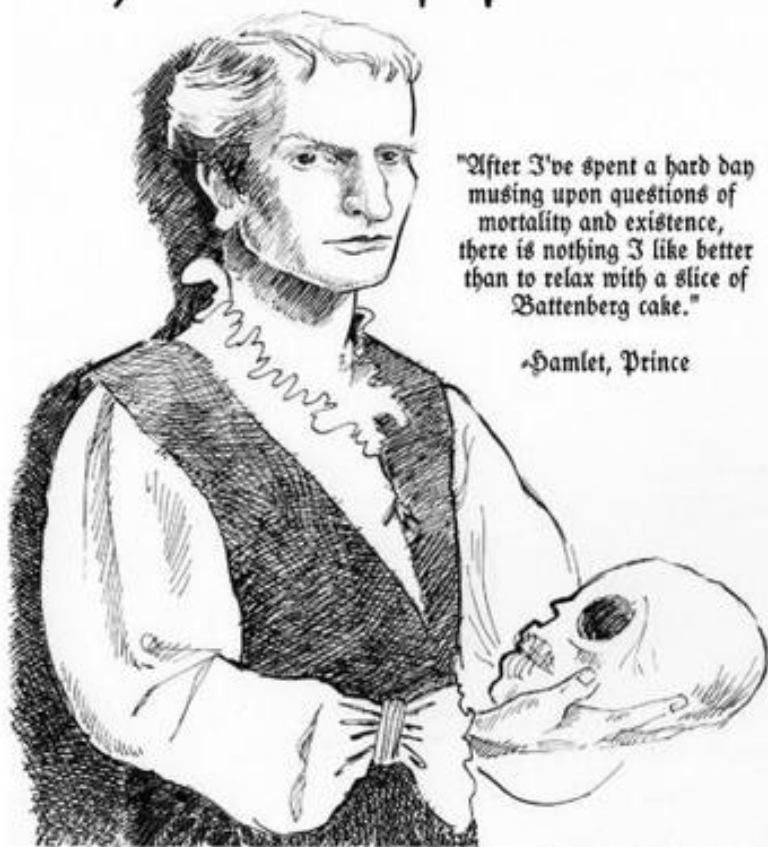
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**Jasper Fforde**

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*For Cressida,  
the bestest sister in the world*

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## ***Author's Note***

This book has been bundled with Special Features, including *The Making of...* wordamentary, deleted scenes, alternative endings and much more.

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The year is 2002. It is fourteen years since Thursday almost pegged out at the 1988 Croquet SuperHoop, and life is beginning to get back to normal....

***First  
Among  
Sequels***

# 1.

## Breakfast

The Swindon that I knew in 2002 had a lot going for it. A busy financial center coupled with excellent infrastructure and surrounded by green and peaceful countryside had made the city about as popular a place as you might find anywhere in the nation. We had our own forty-thousand-seat croquet stadium, the recently finished Cathedral of St. Zvlkx, a concert hall, two local TV networks and the only radio station in England dedicated solely to mariachi music. Our central position in southern England also made us the hub for high-speed overland travel from the newly appointed Clary-LaMarr Travelport. It was little wonder that we called Swindon "the Jewel on the M4."

The dangerously high level of the stupidity surplus was once again the lead story in *The Owl* that morning. The reason for the crisis was clear: Prime Minister Redmond van de Poste and his ruling Commonsense Party had been discharging their duties with a reckless degree of responsibility that bordered on inspired sagacity. Instead of drifting from one crisis to the next and appeasing the nation with a steady stream of knee-jerk legislation and headline-grabbing but arguably pointless initiatives, they had been resolutely building a raft of considered long-term plans that concentrated on unity, fairness and tolerance. It was a state of affairs deplored by Mr. Alfredo Traficcone, leader of the opposition Prevailing Wind Party, who wanted to lead the nation back onto the safer grounds of uninformed stupidity.

"How could they let it get this bad?" asked Landen as he walked into the kitchen, having just dispatched our daughters off to school. They walked themselves, naturally; Tuesday was twelve and took great pride in looking after Jenny, who was now ten.

"Sorry?" I said, my mind full of other matters, foremost

among them the worrying possibility that Pickwick's plumage might *never* grow back, and that she would have to spend the rest of her life looking like a supermarket oven-ready chicken.

"The stupidity surplus," repeated Landen as he sat down at the kitchen table, "I'm all for responsible government, but storing it up like this is bound to cause problems sooner or later--even by acting sensibly, the government has shown itself to be a bunch of idiots."

"There are a lot of idiots in this country," I replied absently, "and they deserve representation as much as the next man."

But he was right. Unlike previous governments that had skillfully managed to eke out our collective stupidity all year round, the current administration had decided to store it all up and then blow it on something *unbelievably* dopey, arguing that one major balls-up every ten years or so was less damaging than a weekly helping of mild political asininity. The problem was, the surplus had reached absurdly high levels, where it had even surpassed the "monumentally dumb" mark. Only a blunder of staggering proportions would remove the surplus, and the nature of this mind-numbing act of idiocy was a matter of considerable media speculation.

"It says here," he said, getting into full rant mode by adjusting his glasses and tapping at the newspaper with his index finger, "that even the government is having to admit that the stupidity surplus is a far, far bigger problem than they had first imagined."

I held the striped dodo cozy I was knitting for Pickwick against her pink and blotchy body to check the size, and she puffed herself up to look more alluring, but to no avail. She then made an indignant plocking noise, which was the only sound she ever uttered.

"Do you think I should knit her a party one as well? Y'know, black, off the shoulder and with sparkly bits in it?"

"But," Landen went on in a lather of outrage, "the prime minister has poured scorn on Traficcone's suggestion to offload our unwanted stupidity to Third World nations, who would be only too happy to have it in exchange for several sacks of cash and a Mercedes or two."

"He's right," I replied with a sigh. "Idiocy offsets are bullshit;

stupidity is our own problem and has to be dealt with on an individual 'stupidity footprint' basis--and landfill *certainly* doesn't work."

I was thinking of the debacle in Cornwall, where twenty thousand tons of half-wittedness was buried in the sixties, only to percolate to the surface two decades later when the residents started to do inexplicably dumb things, such as using an electric mixer in the bath and parting their hair in the center.

"What if," Landen continued thoughtfully, "the thirty million or so inhabitants of the British Archipelago were to all simultaneously fall for one of those e-mail 'tell us all your bank details' phishing scams or--I don't know--fall down a manhole or something?"

"They tried the mass walking-into-lamppost experiment in France to see if they could alleviate *la dette idiote*," I pointed out, "but the seriousness under which the plan was undertaken made it de facto sensible, and all that was damaged was the proud Gallic forehead."

Landen took a sip of coffee, unfolded the paper and scanned the rest of the front page before remarking absently, "I took up your idea and sent my publisher a few outlines for self-help books last week."

"Who do they think you should be helping?"

"Well...*me*...and them, I suppose--isn't that how it's meant to work? It looks really easy. How about this for a title: *Men Are from Earth, Women Are from Earth--Just Deal with It*."

He looked at me and smiled, and I smiled back. I didn't love him just because he had a nice knee, was tall and made me laugh, but because we were two parts of one, and neither of us could imagine life without the other. I wish I had a better way to describe it, but I'm not a poet. Privately he was a husband and father to our three mostly wonderful kids, but professionally he was a writer. Unfortunately, despite winning the 1988 Armitage Shanks Fiction Award for *Bad Sofa*, a string of flops had left the relationship with his publisher a bit strained. So strained, in fact, that he was reduced to penning point-of-sale nonfiction classics such as *The Little Book of Cute Pets That You Really Like to Hug* and *The Darndest Things Kids*

Say. When he wasn't working on these, he was looking after our children and attempting to rekindle his career with a seriously good blockbuster--his magnum opus. It wasn't easy, but it was what he loved, and I loved *him*, so we lived off my salary, which was about the size of Pickwick's brain--not that big, and unlikely to become so.

"This is for you," said Landen, pushing a small parcel wrapped in pink paper across the table.

"Sweetheart," I said, *really* annoyed and *really* pleased all at the same time, "I don't do birthdays."

"I know," he said without looking up, "so you'll just have to humor me."

I unwrapped the package to find a small silver locket and chain. I'm not a jewelry person, but I am a *Landen* person, so held my hair out of the way while he fastened the clasp, then thanked him and gave him a kiss, which he returned. And then, since he knew all about my abhorrence of birthdays, dropped the matter entirely.

"Is Friday up?"

"At this hour?"

Friday, it should be noted, was the eldest of our three children and the only boy. He was now sixteen, and instead of gearing himself up for a successful career with the time industry's elite operatives known as the ChronoGuard, he was a tedious teenage cliché--grunting, sighing at any request no matter how small and staying in bed until past midday, then slouching around the house in a state of semiconsciousness that would do credit to a career zombie. We might not have known he was living with us if it weren't for the grubby cereal bowls that mysteriously appeared in the vague vicinity of the sink, a muffled heavy metal beat from his bedroom that Landen was convinced kept the slugs from the garden and a succession of equally languid no-hopers who called at the door to mumble, "Is Friday at home?"--something that I couldn't resist answering with, "It's a matter of some conjecture."

"When does he go back to school?" asked Landen, who did most of the day-to-day kidwork but, like many men, had trouble remembering specific dates.

"Next Monday," I replied, having gone to retrieve the mail

that had just fallen through the door. "Exclusion from school was better than he deserved--it's a good thing the cops didn't get involved."

"All he did was throw Barney Plotz's cap in a muddy puddle," said Landen reflectively, "and then stomp on it."

"Yes, but Barney Plotz was *wearing* it at the time," I pointed out, thinking privately that the entire Plotz family stomped on in a muddy puddle might be a very good idea indeed. "Friday shouldn't have done what he did. Violence never solved anything."

Landen raised an eyebrow and looked at me.

"Okay, *sometimes* it solves things--but not for him, at least not yet."

"I wonder," mused Landen, "if we could get the nation's teenagers to go on a serious binge of alcohol-inspired dopiness to use up the excess stupidity?"

"It's a surplus of stupidity we have, not stereotypical dreariness," I replied, picking up an envelope at random and staring at the postmark. I still received at least half a dozen fan letters every day, even though the march of time had, fortunately, reduced my celebrity to what the Entertainments Facilitation Department termed Z-4, which is the kind of celebrities who appear in "Whatever happened to..." articles and only ever get column inches if arrested, divorced, in rehab or, if the editor's luck is really in, all three at the same time--and have some tenuous connection to Miss Corby Starlet, or whoever else happens to be the *celebrite du jour*.

The fan mail was mostly from die-hard fans who didn't care that I was Z-4, bless them. They usually asked obscure questions about my many adventures that were now in print, or something about what crap the movie was, or why I'd given up professional croquet. But for the most part, it was from fans of *Jane Eyre*, who wanted to know how Mrs. Fairfax could have been a ninja assassin, whether I *had* to shoot Bertha Rochester and if it was true I'd slept with Edward Rochester--three of the more per sis tent and untrue rumors surrounding the factually dubious first novel of my adventures, *The Eyre Affair*.

Landen grinned. "What's it about? Someone wanting to



know whether Lola Vavoom will play you in the next Thursday film?"

"There won't be one. Not after the disaster of the first. No, it's from the World Croquet Federation. They want me to present a video entitled *The Fifty Greatest Croquet Sporting Moments*."

"Is your SuperHoop fifty-yard peg-out in the top ten?"

I scanned the list. "They have me at twenty-six."

"Tell them ballocks."

"They'll pay me five hundred guineas."

"Cancel the ballocks thing--tell them you'll be honored and overjoyed."

"It's a sellout. I don't do sellouts. Not for *that* price anyway."

I opened a small parcel that contained a copy of the third book in my series: *The Well of Lost Plots*. I showed it to Landen, who made a face.

"Are they still selling?" he asked.

"Unfortunately."

"Am I in that one?"

"No, sweetheart--you're only in number five." I looked at the covering letter. "They want me to sign it."

I had a stack of form letters in the office that explained why I *wouldn't* sign it--the first four Thursday Next books were about as true to real life as a donkey is to a turnip, and my signature somehow gave a credibility that I didn't want to encourage. The only book I *would* sign was the fifth in the series, *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco*, which, unlike the first four, had my seal of approval. The Thursday Next in *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco* was much more of a caring and diplomatic heroine--unlike the Thursday in the previous four, who blasted away at everything in sight, drank, swore, slept around and generally kicked butt all over the Book-World. I wanted the series to be a thought-provoking romp around literature; a book for people who like stories or a story for people who like books. It wasn't to be. The first four in the series had been less a lighthearted chronicling of my adventures and more of a "Dirty Harry meets Fanny Hill," but with a good deal more sex and violence. The publishers managed to be not only factually inaccurate but dangerously slanderous as well. By the time I'd

regained control of the series for *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco*, the damage to my reputation had been done.

"Oh!" said Landen, reading a letter. "A rejection from my publisher. They didn't think *Fatal Parachuting Mistakes and How to Avoid Making Them Again* was what they had in mind for self-help."

"I guess their target audience doesn't include dead people."

"You could be right."

I opened another letter. "Hang on," I said, scanning the lines thoughtfully. "The Swindon Dodo Fanciers Society is offering us thirty grand for Pickers."

I looked across at Pickwick, who had started to do that almost-falling-over thing she does when she goes to sleep standing up. I had built her myself when home-cloning kits were all the rage. At almost twenty-nine and with the serial number D-009, she was the oldest dodo in existence. Because she was an early Version 1.2, she didn't have any wings, as the gene sequence wasn't complete at that time, but then she didn't have built-in cell redundancy either. It was likely she'd outlive...well, everything. In any event, her value had grown considerably as interest in the seventies home-cloning unextincting revolution had suddenly become fashionable. A 1978 V1.5.6 mammoth recently changed hands for sixty thousand, great auks in any condition could be worth up to five grand each, and if you had a pre-1972 trilobite of any order, you could pretty much name your price.

"Thirty grand?" echoed Landen. "Do they know she's a bit challenged in the brain and plumage department?"

"I honestly don't think they care. It would pay off the mortgage."

Pickwick was suddenly wide awake and looking at us with the dodo equivalent of a raised eyebrow, which is indistinguishable from the dodo equivalent of sniffing a raw onion.

"And buy one of those new diesel-molasses hybrid cars," said Landen.

"Or a holiday."

"We could send Friday off to the Swindon Home for Dreary Teenagers," added Landen.

"And Jenny could have a new piano."

It was too much for Pickwick, who fainted dead away in the middle of the table.

"Doesn't have much of a sense of humor, does she?" said Landen with a smile, returning to his paper.

"Not really," I replied, tearing up the letter from the Swindon Dodo Fanciers Society. "But, you know, for a bird of incalculably little brain, I'm sure she understands almost everything we say."

Landen looked at Pickwick, who had by now recovered and was staring suspiciously at her left foot, wondering if it had *always* been there and, if not, what it might be doing creeping up on her.

"It's not likely."

"How's the book going?" I asked, returning to my knitting.

"The self-help stuff?"

"The magnum opus."

Landen looked thoughtful for a moment and then said, "More opus than magnum. I'm trying to figure out whether the lack of progress is writer's block, procrastination, idleness or just plain incompetence."

"Well, now," I said, feigning seriousness, "with such an excellent range of choices, it's hard to put my finger on it. Have you considered that it might be a mixture of all four?"

"By gad!" he said, slapping his palm on his forehead. "You could be right!"

"Seriously, though?"

He shrugged. "It's so-so. Although the story is toodling along, there's no real bite to it--I think I need to inject a new plot twist or character."

"Which book are you working on?"

"*Bananas for Edward.*"

"You'll think of something, sweetheart--you usually do."

I dropped a stitch on my knitting, rehooked it, checked the wall clock and then said, "Mum texted me earlier."

"Has she got the hang of it yet?"

"She said, 'L&Ks4DnRNXT-SNDY??'"

"Hmm," said Landen, "one of the most coherent yet. That's probably code for 'I've forgotten how to text.' Why does she

even bother to try to use new technology at her age?"

"You know what she's like. I'll nip over and see what she wants on my way to work."

"Don't forget about Friday and the ChronoGuard 'If You've Got Time for Us, We've Got Time for You' careers presentation this evening."

"How could I forget?" I replied, having tried to cajole Friday into this for weeks.

"He's behind with his homework," added Landen, "and since you're at least six times more scary than I am, would you do phase one of the teenager-waking procedure? Sometimes I think he's actually glued to the bed."

"Considering his current level of personal hygiene," I mused, "you're probably right."

"If he doesn't get up," added Landen with a smile, "you could always threaten him with a bar of soap and some shampoo."

"And traumatize the poor lad? Shame on *you*, Mr. Parke-Laine."

Landen laughed, and I went up to Friday's room.

I knocked on his door, received no reply and opened it to a fetid smell of old socks and unwashed adolescence. Carefully bottled and distilled, it would do sterling work as a shark repellent, but I didn't say so. Teenage sons react badly to sarcasm. The room was liberally covered with posters of Jimi Hendrix, Che Guevara and Wayne Skunk, lead guitar and vocals of Strontium Goat. The floor was covered with discarded clothes, deadline-expired schoolwork and side plates with hardened toast crusts on them. I *think* the room had once been carpeted, but I couldn't be sure anymore.

"Hiya, Friday," I said to an inert object wrapped up in a duvet. I sat on the bed and prodded a small patch of skin I could see.

"Grunt," came a voice from somewhere deep within the bed-clothes.

"Your father tells me that you're behind with your homework."

"Grunt."

"Well, yes, you might be suspended for two weeks, but you still need to do your coursework."

"Grunt."

"The time? It's nine right now, and I need you to be sitting up with your eyes open before I leave the room."

There was another grunt and a fart. I sighed, prodded him again, and eventually something with unwashed dark hair sat up and stared at me beneath heavy lids.

"Grunt," it said. "Grunt-grunt."

I thought of making some sarcastic remark about how it helps to open your mouth when talking but didn't, as I desperately needed his compliance, and although I couldn't actually speak teenage Mumblegrunt, I could certainly understand it.

"How's the music going?" I asked, as there is a certain degree of consciousness that you have to bring teenagers toward before leaving them to get up on their own. Fall even a few degrees below the critical threshold and they go back to sleep for eight hours--sometimes more.

"Mumble," he said slowly. "I've grunt-mumble formed a band grunty-mutter."

"A band? What's it called?"

He took a deep breath and rubbed his face. He knew he wouldn't get rid of me until he'd answered at least three questions. He looked at me with his bright, intelligent eyes and sniffed before announcing in a rebellious tone, "It's called the Gobshites."

"You can't call it that!"

Friday shrugged. "All right," he grumbled in a slovenly manner, "we'll go back to the original name."

"Which is?"

"The Wankers."

"Actually, I think Gobshites is a terrific name for a band. Pithy and degenerate all at the same time. Now, listen, I know you're not keen on this whole 'career in the time industry' stuff, but you did promise. I'll expect you to be all bright-eyed, alert and bushy-tailed, washed, showered, scrubbed and all homework finished by the time I get back."

I stared at the picture of slovenly teenagerhood in front of me. I'd have settled for "awake and/or coherent"--but I always aim high.

"Allrightmum," he said in a long slur.

As soon as I had closed the door behind me I heard him flop back. It didn't matter. He was awake, and his father could do the rest.

"I expect he's raring to go?" suggested Landen when I came downstairs. "Had to lock him in his room to curb his enthusiasm?"

"Champing at the bit," I replied wearily. "We'd get a more dynamic response from a vapid slug on tranquilizers."

"I wasn't so dreary when I was a kid," said Landen thoughtfully, handing me my tea. "I wonder where he gets it from?"

"Modern living, but don't worry. He's only sixteen--he'll snap out of it."

"I hope so."

And that was the problem. This wasn't just the usual worries of concerned parents with grunty and unintelligible teenagers; he *had* to snap out of it. I'd met the future Friday several times in the past, and he'd risen to the lofty heights of ChronoGuard director-general with absolute power over the Standard History Eventline, a job of awesome responsibilities. He was instrumental in saving my life, his own--and the planet from destruction no fewer than 756 times. By his fortieth birthday, he would be known as "Apocalypse" Next. But that hadn't happened yet. And with Friday's chief interest in life at present being Strontium Goat, sleeping, Che Guevara, Hendrix and more sleeping, we were beginning to wonder how it ever would.

Landen looked at his watch.

"Isn't it time you were off to work, wifey darling? The good folk of Swindon would be utterly lost and confused without you to take the burden of floor-covering decision making from them."

He was right. I was already ten minutes late, and I kissed him several times, just in case something unexpected occurred that might separate us for longer than planned. By "unexpected" I was thinking of the time he was eradicated for two years by the Goliath Corporation. Although the vast multinational was back in business after many years in the

financial and political doldrums, they had not yet attempted any of the monkey business that had marked our relationship in the past. I hoped they'd learned their lesson, but I'd never quite freed myself of the idea that a further fracas with them might be just around the corner, so I always made quite sure that I'd told Landen everything I needed to tell him.

"Busy day ahead?" he asked as he saw me to the garden gate.

"A large carpet to install for a new company in the financial center--bespoke executive pile, plus the usual quotes. I think Spike and I have a stair carpet to do in an old Tudor house with uneven treads, so one of those nightmare jobs."

He paused and sucked his lower lip for a moment.

"Good, so...no...no...SpecOps stuff or anything?"

"Sweetheart!" I said, giving him a hug. "That's all past history. I do carpets these days--it's a lot less stressful, believe me. Why?"

"No reason. It's just that what with *Diatrymas* being seen as far north as Salisbury, people are saying that the old SpecOps personnel might be recalled into service."

"Six-foot-tall carnivorous birds from the late Paleocene would be SO-13 business if they were real, which I doubt," I pointed out. "I was SO-27. The Literary Detectives. When copies of *Tristram Shandy* are threatening old ladies in dark alleys, I just *might* be asked for my opinion. Besides, no one's reading books much anymore, so I'm fairly redundant."

"That's true," said Landen. "Perhaps being an author isn't such a great move after all."

"Then write your magnum opus for *me*," I told him tenderly. "I'll be your audience, wife, fan club, sex kitten and critic all rolled into one. It's me picking up Tuesday from school, right?"

"Right."

"And you'll pick up Jenny?"

"I won't forget. What shall I do if Pickwick starts shivering in that hopelessly pathetic way that she does?"

"Pop her in the airing cupboard--I'll try and get her cozy finished at work."

"Not so busy, then?"

I kissed him again and departed.

## 2.

### Mum and Polly and Mycroft

My mother's main aim in life was to get from the cradle to the grave with the minimum of fuss and bother and the maximum of tea and Battenberg. Along the way she brought up three children, attended a lot of Women's Federation meetings and managed to squeeze a few severely burned meals somewhere in between. It wasn't until I was six that I realized that cake wasn't meant to be 87 percent carbon and that chicken actually tasted of something. Despite all this, or perhaps even *because* of it, we all loved her a great deal.

My mother lived less than a mile away and actually on the route to work, so I often dropped in just to make sure she was okay and wasn't about to embark on some harebrained scheme, as was her habit. A few years ago she had hoarded tinned pears on the principle that once she'd cornered the market, she could "name her price," a flagrant misunderstanding of the rules of supply and demand that did no damage to the tinned-fruit producers of the world but condemned her immediate family and friends to pears at every meal for almost three years.

She was the sort of parent you would want to have living close by, but only on the grounds that she would then never come to stay. I loved her dearly, but in small doses. A cup of tea here, a dinner there--and as much child care as I could squeeze out of her. The text excuse I gave Landen was actually something of a mild fib, as the *real* reason for my popping around was to pick something up from Mycroft's workshop.

"Hello, darling!" said Mum as soon as she opened the door. "Did you get my text?"

"Yes. But you must learn how to use the backspace and delete keys--it all came out as nonsense."

"L&Ks4DnRNXT-SNDY??" she repeated, showing me her cell phone. "What else *could* that mean but 'Landen and kids for



dinner next Sunday?' Really, darling, how you even *begin* to communicate with your children, I have no idea."

"That wasn't *real* text shorthand," I said, narrowing my eyes suspiciously. "You just made it up."

"I'm barely eighty-two," she said indignantly. "I'm not on the scrap heap yet. Made up the text indeed! Do you want to come back for lunch?" she added, without seeming to draw breath. "I've got a few friends coming around, and after we've discussed who is the most unwell, we'll agree volubly with one another about the sorry state of the nation and then put it all to rights with poorly thought-out and totally impractical ideas. And if there's time after that, we might even play cribbage."

"Hello, Auntie," I said to Polly, who hobbled out of the front room with the aid of a stick, "If I texted you 'L&Ks4DnRNXT-SNDY??' what would you think I meant?"

Polly frowned and thought for a moment, her prunelike forehead rising in a folding ripple like a festoon curtain. She was over ninety and looked so unwell that she was often mistaken for dead when asleep on the bus. Despite this she was totally sound upstairs, with only three or four fair-to-serious medical ailments, unlike my mother, who had the full dozen--or so she claimed.

"Well, do you know I'd be a bit confused--"

"Hah!" I said to Mum. "You see?"

"--because," Polly carried on, "if *you* texted me asking for Landen and the kids to come over for Sunday dinner, I'd not know why you hadn't asked him yourself."

"Ah...I see," I mumbled, suspicious that the two of them had been colluding in some way--as they generally did. Still, I never knew why they made me feel as though I were an eighteen-year-old when I was now fifty-two and myself in the sort of respectable time of life that I thought they should be. That's the thing about hitting fifty. All your life you think the half century is death's adolescence, but actually it's really not that bad, as long as you can remember where you left your glasses.

"Happy birthday, by the way," said my mother. "I got you something--look."

She handed me the most hideous sweater you could possibly

imagine.

"I don't know what to say, Mum, and I really mean that--a short-sleeved lime green sweater with a hood and mock-antler buttons."

"Do you like it?"

"One's attention is drawn to it instantly."

"Good! Then you'll wear it straightaway?"

"I wouldn't want to ruin it," I replied hastily. "I'm just off to work."

"Ooh!" said Polly. "I've only now remembered." She handed me a CD in a plain sleeve. "This is a preproduction copy of *Hosing the Dolly*."

"It's what?"

"Please try to keep up with the times, darling. *Hosing the Dolly*. The new album by Strontium Goat. It won't be out until November. I thought Friday might like it."

"It's really totally out there, man," put in my mother. "Whatever that means. There's a solo guitar riff on the second track that reminded me of Friday's playing and was so good it made my toes tingle--although that might just have been a pinched nerve. Wayne Skunk's granny is Mrs. Arbuthnot--you know, the funny old lady with the large wart on her nose and the elbows that bend both ways. He sent it to her."

I looked at the CD. Friday *would* like it, I was certain of that.

"And," added Polly, leaning closer and with a conspiratorial wink, "you don't have to tell him it was from us--I know what teenagers are like, and a bit of parental kudos counts for a lot."

"Thank you," I said, and meant it. It was more than a CD--it was currency.

"Good!" said my mother. "Have you got time for a cup of tea and a slice of Battenberg?"

"No, thank you--I'm going to pick something up from Mycroft's workshop, and then I'll be on my way."

"How about some Battenberg to go, then?"

"I've just had breakfast."

The doorbell rang.

"Ooooh!" said Polly, peering furtively out the window. "What fun. It looks like a market researcher!"

"Right," said my mother in a very military tone. "Let's see

how long we can keep him before he runs out screaming. I'll pretend to have mild dementia, and you can complain about your sciatica in German. We'll try to beat our personal Market-Researcher Containment record of two hours and twelve minutes."

I shook my head sadly. "I wish you two would grow up."

"You are so judgmental, daughter dear," scolded my mother. "When you reach our age and level of physical decrepitude, you'll take your entertainment wherever you can find it. Now, be off with you."

And they shooed me into the kitchen while I mumbled something about how remedial basket weaving, whist drives or daytime soaps would probably suit them better. Mind you, inflicting mental torture on market researchers kept them busy, I suppose.

I walked out the back door, crossed the back garden and quietly entered the wooden out house that was my uncle Mycroft's laboratory. I switched on the light and walked to my Porsche, which was looking a little forlorn under a dust sheet. It was still unrepaired from the accident five years before. The damage hadn't been that severe, but 356 parts were getting pricey these days, and we couldn't spare the cash. I reached into the cockpit, pulled the release and opened the hood. It was here that I kept a tote bag containing twenty thousand Welsh tocyns. On this side of the border pretty worthless, but enough to buy a three-bedroom house in Merthyr. I wasn't planning to move to the Welsh Socialist Republic, of course--I needed the cash for a Welsh cheese deal I had cooking that evening. I checked that the cash was all still there and was just replacing the sheet on the car when a noise made me turn. Standing at the workbench in the half-light was my uncle Mycroft. An undeniable genius, with his keen mind he had pushed the frontiers in a range of disciplines that included genetics, fusion power, abstract geometry, perpetual motion and romantic fiction. It was he who had ushered in the home-cloning revolution, he who may have developed a memory-erasure machine and he who had invented the Prose Portal that had catapulted me into fiction. He was dressed in his trademark wool three-piece suit but without the jacket, his

shirtsleeves were rolled up, and he was in what we all called his "inventing mode." He seemed to be concentrating on a delicate mechanism, the function of which was impossible to guess. As I watched him in silence and with a growing sense of wonder, he suddenly noticed me.

"Ah!" he said with a smile. "Thursday! Haven't seen you for a while--all well?"

"Yes," I replied a bit uncertainly, "I think so."

"Splendid! I just had an idea for a cheap form of power: by bringing pasta and antipasta together, we could be looking at the utter annihilation of ravioli and the liberation of vast quantities of energy. I safely predict that an average-size cannelloni would be able to power Swindon for over a year. Mind you, I could be wrong."

"You're not often wrong," I said quietly.

"I think I was wrong to start inventing in the first place," he replied after a moment's reflection. "Just because I *can* do it, it doesn't follow that I *should*. If scientists stopped to think about their creations more, the world might be a better--"

He broke off talking and looked at me in a quizzical manner.

"You're staring at me in a strange way," he said, with uncharacteristic astuteness.

"Well, yes," I replied, trying to frame my words carefully. "You see...I think...that is to say...I'm *very* surprised to see you."

"Really?" he said, putting down the device he was working on. "Why?"

"Well," I replied with greater firmness, "I'm surprised to see you because...you died six years ago!"

"I did?" inquired Mycroft with genuine concern. "Why does no one tell me these things?"

I shrugged, as there was really no good answer to this.

"Are you sure?" he asked, patting himself on the chest and stomach and then taking his pulse to try to convince himself I might be mistaken. "I know I'm a bit forgetful, but I'm certain I would have remembered *that*."

"Yes, quite sure," I replied. "I was there."

"Well, goodness," murmured Mycroft thoughtfully, "if what you say is correct and I *am* dead, it's entirely possible that this

isn't me at all, but a variable-response holographic recording of some sort. Let's have a look for a projector."

And so saying, he began to ferret through the piles of dusty machinery in his lab. And with nothing better to do and faintly curious, I joined in.

We searched for a good five minutes, but after finding nothing even vaguely resembling a holographic projector, Mycroft and I sat down on a packing case and didn't speak for some moments.

"Dead," muttered Mycroft with a resigned air. "Never been that before. Not even once. Are you quite sure?"

"Quite sure," I replied. "You were eighty-seven. It was expected."

"Oh, yes," he said, as though some dim memory were stirring. "And Polly?" he added, suddenly remembering his wife. "How is she?"

"She's very well," I told him. "She and Mum are up to their old tricks."

"Annoying market researchers?"

"Among other things. But she's missing you dreadfully."

"And I her." He looked nervous for a moment. "Has she got a boyfriend yet?"

"At ninety-two?"

"Damn good-looking woman--smart, too."

"Well, she hasn't."

"Hmm. Well, If you see someone suitable, O favorite niece, push him her way, won't you? I don't want her to be lonely."

"I'll do that, Uncle, I promise."

We sat in silence for a few seconds more, and I shivered.

"Mycroft," I said, suddenly thinking that perhaps there wasn't a scientific explanation for his appearance after all, "I'm going to try something."

I put out my fingertips to touch him, but where they should have met the firm resistance of his shirtsleeve, there was none--my fingers just melted into him. He wasn't there. Or if he was, he was something insubstantial--a phantom.

"Ooooh!" he said as I withdrew my hand. "That felt odd."

"Mycroft...you're a *ghost*."

"Nonsense! Scientifically proven to be completely

impossible." He paused for thought. "Why would I be one of those?"

I shrugged. "I don't know--perhaps there's something you hadn't finished at your death and it's been bothering you."

"Great Scott! You're right. I never did finish the final chapter of *Love Among the Begonias*."

In retirement Mycroft had spent his time writing romantic novels, all of which sold surprisingly well. So well, in fact, that he had attracted the lasting enmity of Daphne Farquitt, the indisputable leader in the field. She fired off an accusatory letter accusing him of "wanton" plagiarism. A barrage of claims and counterclaims followed, which ended only when Mycroft died. It was so venomous, in fact, that conspiracy theorists claimed he was poisoned by crazed Farquitt fans. We had to publish his death certificate to quell the rumors.

"Polly finished *Love Among the Begonias* for you," I said.

"Ah," he replied, "maybe I've come back to haunt that loathsome cow Farquitt."

"If that were the case, you'd be over at her place doing the wooo-wooo thing and clanking chains."

"Hmm," he said disdainfully, "that doesn't sound very dignified."

"How about some last-minute inventing? Some idea you never got around to researching?"

Mycroft thought long and hard, making several bizarre faces as he did so.

"Fascinating!" he said at last, panting with the effort. "I can't do original thought anymore. As soon as my brain stopped functioning, that was the end of Mycroft the inventor. You're right: I must be dead. It's *most* depressing."

"But no idea why you're here?"

"None," he said despondently.

"Well," I said as I got up, "I'll make a few inquiries. Do you want Polly to know you've reappeared in spirit form?"

"I'll leave it to your judgment," he said. "But if you do tell her, you might mention something about how she was the finest partner any man could have. Two minds with but a single thought, two hearts that beat as one."

I snapped my fingers. That's how I wanted to describe

Landen and me. "That was good--can I use it?"

"Of course. Have you any idea how much I miss Polly?"

I thought of the two years Landen had been eradicated. "I do. And she misses you, Uncle, every second of every day."

He looked up at me, and I saw his eyes glisten.

I tried to put my hand on his arm, but it went through his phantom limb and instead landed on the hard surface of the workbench.

"I'll have a think about why I might be here," said Mycroft in a quiet voice. "Will you look in on me from time to time?" He smiled to himself and began to tinker with the device on the workbench again.

"Of course. Good-bye, Uncle."

"Good-bye, Thursday."

And he slowly began to fade. I noticed as he did so that the room grew warmer again, and within a few more seconds he had vanished entirely. I retrieved the bag of Welsh cash and walked thoughtfully to the door, turning to have one last look. The workshop was empty, dusty and forgotten. Abandoned as it was when Mycroft died, six years before.

### 3.

## Acme Carpets

The Special Operations Network was instituted in 1928 to handle policing duties considered either too unusual or too specialized to be tackled by the regular force. Amongst the stranger departments were those that dealt with vampires (SO-17), time travel (SO-12), literary crime (SO-27) and the Cheese Enforcement Agency (SO-31). Notoriously secretive and with increased accusations of unaccountability and heavy-handedness, 90 percent of the service was disbanded during the winter of 1991-92. Of the thirty-two departments, only five were retained. My department, the Literary Detectives, was not among them.

The name Acme Carpets was a misnomer, to be honest. We didn't just do carpets--we did tiles, linoleum and wooden flooring, too. Competitive, fast and reliable, we had been trading in Swindon for ten years, ever since the SpecOps divisions were disbanded in '92. In 1996 we moved to bigger premises on the Oxford Road trading estate. If you needed any sort of floor covering in the Swindon area, you could come to us for the most competitive quote.

I pushed open the front doors and was surprised that there was no one around. Not that there was a lack of customers, as Mondays before ten were generally pretty light, but that there was no staff--not even in the office or skulking next to the spotlessly clean complimentary-tea area. I walked to the back of the store, past quality rolls of carpet and a varied selection of samples piled high on the light and spacious showroom floor. I opened the heavy swinging doors that led to the storerooms and froze. Standing next to a pile of last year's sample books was a flightless bird about four feet high and with an unfeasibly large and rather nastily serrated beak. It stared at me suspiciously with two small black eyes. I looked around. The stockroom staff were all dutifully standing still,



and behind the *Dyatryma* was a stocky figure in an Acme Carpets uniform, a man with a large, brow-ridged head and deeply sunken brown eyes. He had a lot in common with the Paleocene anomaly that faced me--he, too, had once been extinct and was here not by the meanderings of natural selection but from the inconsiderate meddling of a scientist who never stopped to ask whether if a thing *could* be done, that it *should*. His name was Stig, and he was a reengineered neanderthal, ex-SO-13 and a valued colleague from the old days of SpecOps. He'd saved my butt on several occasions, and I'd helped him and his fellow extinctees to species self-determination.

"Don't move," said Stig in a low rumble. "We don't want to hurt it."

He never did. Stig saw any renegade unextinctees as something akin to family and always caught them alive, if possible. On the other hand, chimeras, a hodgepodge of the hobby sequencer's art, were another matter--he dispatched them without mercy, and without pain.

The *Diatryma* made a vicious jab toward me; I jumped to my left as the beak snapped shut with the sound of oversize castanets. Quick as a flash, Stig leaped forward and covered the creature's head with an old flour sack, which seemed to subdue it enough for him to wrestle it to the floor. I joined in, as did the entire storeroom staff, and within a few moments we had wrapped some duct tape securely around its massive beak, rendering it harmless.

"Thanks," said Stig, securing a leash around the bird's neck.

"Salisbury?" I asked as we walked past the rolls of Wilton shag and cushioned linoleum in a wide choice of colors.

"Devizes," replied the neanderthal. "We had to run for eight miles across open farmland to catch it."

"Did anyone see you?" I asked, mindful of any rumors getting out.

"Who'd believe them if they did?" he replied. "But there're more *Diatrymas*--we'll be out again to night."

Acme Carpets, as you might have gathered, was just the cover story. In truth it was the old SpecOps under another name. The service hadn't really been disbanded in the early

nineties--it just went underground, and freelance. All *strictly* unofficial, of course. Luckily, the Swindon chief of police was Braxton Hicks, my old divisional boss at SpecOps. Although he suspected what we got up to, he told me he would feign ignorance unless "someone gets eaten or something." Besides, if we didn't mop up all the bizarrer elements of modern living, his regular officers would have to, and Braxton might then have a demand of bonus payments for "actions beyond the call of duty." And Hicks loved his bud get almost as much as he loved his golf. So the cops didn't bother us and we didn't bother them.

"We have a question," said Stig. "Do we have to mention the possibility of being trampled by mammoths on our Health and Safety Risk-Assessment Form?"

"No--that's the part of Acme we don't want anyone to know about. The safety stuff only relates to carpet laying."

"We understand," said Stig. "What about being shredded by a chimera?"

"Just carpets, Stig."

"Okay. By the way," he added, "have you told Landen about all your SpecOps work yet? You said you were going to."

"I'm...building up to it."

"You should tell him, Thursday."

"I know."

"And have a good anniversary of your mother giving birth to you."

"Thank you."

I bade Stig good day and then walked to the store offices, which were situated in a raised position halfway between the storeroom and the showroom floor. From there you could see pretty much everything that went on in the building.

As I walked in, a man looked up from where he was crouched under the desk.

"Have you captured it?" he asked in a quavering voice.

"Yes."

He looked relieved and clambered out from his hiding place. He was in his early forties, and his features were just beginning to show the shades of middle age. Around his eyes were fine lines, his dark hair now flecked with gray. Even

though he was management, he also wore an Acme Carpets uniform. Only his looked a lot better on him than mine did on me. In fact, he looked a lot better in his than *anyone* in the establishment, leading us to accuse him of having his professionally tailored, something he strenuously denied but, given his fastidious nature, not outside the bounds of possibility. Bowden Cable had been my partner at the Swindon branch of the Literary Detectives, and it seemed only natural that he would have the top admin job at Acme Carpets when we were all laid off from SpecOps.

"Are we busy today?" I asked, pouring myself a cup of coffee.

Bowden pointed to the newspaper. "Have you read this?"

"The stupidity surplus?"

"Part of it, I guess," he replied despondently. "Incredibly enough, reality TV has just gotten *worse*."

"Is that possible?" I asked. "Wasn't *Celebrity Trainee Pathologist* the pits?" I thought for a moment. "Actually, *Whose Life Support Do We Switch Off?* was worse. Or maybe *Sell Your Granny*. Wow, the choice these days makes it all so tricky to decide."

Bowden laughed.

"I'll agree that *Granny* lowered the bar for distasteful program makers everywhere, but RTA-TV, never one to shrink from a challenge, has devised *Samaritan Kidney Swap*. Ten renal-failure patients take turns trying to convince a tissue-typed donor--and the voting viewers--which one should have his spare kidney."

I groaned. Reality TV was to me the worst form of entertainment--the modern equivalent of paying sixpence to watch lunatics howling at the walls down at the local mad house. I shook my head sadly.

"What's wrong with a good book?" I asked.

Bowden shrugged. In these days of junk TV, short attention spans and easy-to-digest sound bites, it seemed that the book, the noble device to which both Bowden and I had devoted much of our lives, was being marginalized into just another human storytelling experience also-ran, along with the epic poem, Greek theater, Jackanory, Beta and Tarzanagrams.

"How's the family?" asked Bowden, trying to elevate the mood.

"They're all good," I replied. "Except Friday, who is still incapable of any human activity other than torpidity."

"And Pickwick? Feathers growing back?"

"No--listen, can you knit?"

"No.... Why?"

"No reason. What's on the books for us today?"

Bowden picked up a clipboard and thumbed through the pages. "Spike's got a brace of undead to deal with and a possible pack of howlers in the Savenake. Stig's still on the path of those *Diatrymas*. The Taste Division has got an outbreak of stonecladding to deal with in Cirencester, and the Pampas Squad will be busy on a slash 'n' burn in Bristol. Oh, yes--and we've an outbreak of doppelgangers in Chippenham."

"Any literary stuff?" I asked hopefully.

"Only Mrs. Mattock and her stolen first editions--*again*. Face it, Thurs, books just don't light anyone's candle these days. It's as good that they don't--add the sixteen or so carpets to be laid and the twenty-eight quotes needed yesterday, and we're kind of stretched. Do we pull Spike off zombies to do stair runners?"

"Can't we just drag in some freelance installers?"

"And pay them with what? An illegal *Diatryma* each?"

"It's that bad, is it?"

"Thursday, it's *always* that bad. We're nuzzling up to the overdraft limit again."

"No problem. I've got a seriously good cheese deal going down this evening."

"I don't want to know about it. When you're arrested, I need *deniability*--and besides, if you actually sold carpets instead of gallivanting around like a lunatic, you wouldn't need to buy and sell on the volatile cheese market."

"That reminds me," I said with a smile. "I'll be out of my office today, so don't put any calls through."

"Thursday!" he said in an exasperated tone. "*Please* don't vanish today of *all* days. I really need you to quote for the new lobby carpet in the Finis, I've got the Wilton rep popping in at four-thirty to show us their new line, and the Health and

Safety Inspectorate is coming in to make sure we're up to speed."

"On safety procedures?"

"Good Lord no! On how to fill the forms in properly."

"Listen," I said, "I've got to take Friday to the ChronoGuard career night at five-thirty, so I'll try to get back a couple of hours before then and do some quotes. Have a list ready for me."

"Already done," he said, and before I could make up an excuse, he passed me a clipboard full of addresses and contact names.

"Good," I muttered, "very efficient--nice job."

I took my coffee and walked to my own office, a small and windowless room next to the forklift-recharging point. I sat at my desk and stared despondently at the list Bowden had given me, then rocked back and forth on my chair in an absent mood. Stig had been right. I *should* tell Landen about what I got up to, but life was better with him thinking I was working at Acme. Besides, running several illegal SpecOps departments wasn't all I did. It was...well, the tip of a very large and misshapen iceberg.

I got up, took off my jacket and was about to change into more comfortable clothes when there was another tap at the door. I opened it to reveal a large and muscular man a few years younger than myself and looking even more incongruous in his Acme Carpets uniform than I looked in mine--although I doubted that anyone would ever try to tell him so. He had long dreadlocks that reached almost to his waist and were tied back in a loose hair band, and he was wearing a liberal amount of jewelry, similar to the sort that Goths are fond of--skulls, bats, things like that. But it wasn't for decoration--it was for protection. This was ex-SO-17 operative "Spike" Stoker, the most successful vampire staker and werewolf hunter in the Southwest, and although no friend of the undead, he was a friend of mine.

"Happy birthday, bookworm," he said genially. "Got a second?"

I looked at my watch. I was late for work. Not carpet work, of course, since I was already there, but *work* work.

"Is it about health and safety?"

"No, this is important and relevant."

He led the way to the other side of the storeroom, just next to where we kept the adhesive, tacks and grippers. We entered a door hidden behind a poster for Brinton's Carpets and took a small flight of steps down to the level below. Spike opened a sturdy door with a large brass key, and we stepped into what I described as the "Containment Suite" but what Spike referred to as the "Weirdshitorium." His appraisal was better. Our work took us to the very limits of credibility--to a place where even the most stalwart conspiracy theorists would shake their heads and remark sarcastically, "Oh, yeah...right." When we were SpecOps, we had secrecy, manpower, bud get and unaccountability to help us do the job. Now we had just secrecy, complimentary tea and cookies and a big brass key. It was here that Stig kept his creatures until he decided what to do with them and where Spike incarcerated any of the captured undead for observation--in case they were thinking of becoming either *nearly* dead or *mostly* dead. Death, I had discovered long ago, was available in varying flavors, and none of them particularly palatable.

We passed a cell that was full of gallon-size glass jars containing captured Supreme Evil Beings. They were small, wraithlike objects about the size and texture of well-used dish cloths, only less substantial, and they spent most of the time bickering over who was the *most* supreme Supreme Evil Being. But we weren't here to bother with SEBs; Spike led me on to a cell right at the end of the corridor and opened the door. Sitting on a chair in the middle of the room was a man in jeans and a plain leather jacket. He was staring at the floor with the light on above, so I couldn't at first see his face, and his large and well-manicured hands were clenched tightly in front of him. I also noticed that his ankle was attached to the floor by a sturdy chain. I winced. Spike would have to be right about this one--imprisonment of something actually *human* was definitely illegal and could be seriously bad for business.

"Hey!" said Spike and the figure slowly raised his head to look at me. I recognized him instantly and not without a certain degree of alarm. It was Felix8, Acheron Hades'

henchman from way back in the days of the *Jane Eyre* adventure. Hades had taken the face from the first Felix when he died and implanted it on a suitable stranger who'd been bent to his evil will. Whenever a Felix died, which was quite often, he just swapped the face. Felix8's real name was Danny Chance, but his freewill had been appropriated by Hades--he was merely an empty vessel, devoid of pity or morals. His life had no meaning other than to do his master's bidding. The point now was, his master had died sixteen years ago, and the last time I saw Felix8 was at the Penderyn Hotel in Merthyr, the capital of the Welsh Socialist Republic.

Felix8 looked at me with a slight sense of amusement and gave a subtle nod of greeting.

"Where did you find him?" I asked.

"Outside your place half an hour ago. He had this on him." Spike showed me an ugly-looking machine pistol with a delicately carved stock. "There was a single round in the chamber."

I bent down to Felix8's level and stared at him for a moment. "Who sent you?"

Felix8 smiled, said nothing and looked at the chain that was firmly clasped around his ankle.

"What do you want?"

Still Felix8 said nothing.

"Where have you been these past sixteen years?"

All my questions were met with blank insolence, and after five minutes of this I walked back outside the cell block, Spike at my side.

"Who reported him?" I asked.

"Your stalker--what's his name again?"

"Millon."

"Right. He thought Felix8 might have been *another* stalker and was going to warn him off, but when he noticed the absence of notebooks, cameras or even a duffel coat, he called me."

I thought for a moment. If Felix8 was back on my trail, then somebody in the Hades family was looking for revenge--and they were big on revenge. I'd had run-ins with the Hades family before, and I thought they'd learned their lesson by

now. I had personally defeated Acheron, Aornis and Cocytus, which left only Lethe and Phlgethon. Lethe was the "white sheep" of the family and spent most of his time doing charity work, which left only Phlgethon, who had dropped off the radar in the mid-nineties, despite numerous manhunts by SO-5 and myself.

"What do you suggest?" I asked. "He doesn't fall into any of the categories that might ethically give us a reason to keep him under lock and key without trial of some sort. After all, he's only wearing the *face* of Felix--under there he's an erased Danny Chance, married father of two who went missing in 1985."

"I agree we can't keep him," replied Spike, "but if we let him go he'll just try to kill you."

"I live to be over a hundred," I murmured. "I know--I've met the future me."

It was said without much conviction. I'd seen enough of time's paradoxical nature to know that meeting the future me wasn't any guarantee of a long life.

"We'll keep him for twenty-four hours," I announced. "I'll make a few inquiries and see if I can figure out which Hades is involved--if any. He might be simply trying to carry out the last order he was given. After all, he was under orders to kill me, but no one said anything about *when*."

"Thursday...?" began Spike in a tone that I recognized and didn't like.

"No," I said quickly. "Out of the question."

"The only reason he'd mind being killed," said Spike in an annoyingly matter-of-fact way, "is that it would mean he failed to carry out his mission--to kill you."

"I hear you, Spike, but he's done nothing wrong. Give me a day, and if I can't find anything, we'll hand him over to Braxton."

"Okay, then," replied Spike, with a sulky air of disappointment.

"Another thing," I said as we returned to the carpet storeroom. "My uncle Mycroft has returned as a ghost."

"It happens," replied Spike with a shrug. "Did he seem substantial?"



"As you or I."

"How long was he materialized for?"

"Seven minutes, I guess."

"Then you got him at first haunting. First-timers are always the most solid."

"That might be so, but I'd like to know *why*."

"I'm owed a few favors by the Realm of the Dead," he said offhandedly, "so I can find out. By the way, have you told Landen about all this crazy SpecOps shit?"

"I'm telling him this evening."

"Sure you are."

I walked back to my office, locked the door and changed out of the less-than-appealing Acme Carpets uniform and put on something more comfortable. I would have to speak to Aornis Hades about Felix8, but she would probably tell me to go and stick it in my ear--after all, she was seven years into a thirty-year enloopment based on my testimony, and yours truly was unlikely to fill her evil little soul with any sort of heartwarming benevolence.

I finished lacing my boots, locked the door, refilled my water bottle and placed it in the shoulder bag. Acme Carpets might have been a cover for my clandestine work at SpecOps, but this itself was cover for *another* job that only Bowden knew about. If Landen found out about SpecOps, he'd be annoyed--if he found out about Jurisfiction, he'd go bonkers. Not long after the Minotaur's attack following the '88 SuperHoop, Landen and I had a heart-to-heart where I told him I was giving up Jurisfiction--my primary duty being wife and mother. And so it was agreed. Unfortunately, my *other* primary duty was to fiction--the make-believe. Unable to reconcile the two, I did both and lied a bit--well, a lot, actually--to plaster over the gaping crack in my loyalties. It wasn't with an easy or light heart, but it had worked for the past fourteen years. The odd thing was, Jurisfiction didn't earn me a penny and was dangerous and wildly unpredictable. There was another reason I liked it, too--it brought me into close contact with *story*. It would have been easier to get a registered cheesehead off a five-times-a-day Limburger habit than to keep me away from fiction. But, hey--I could handle it.

I sat down, took a deep breath and opened the TravelBook I kept in my bag. It had been given to me by Mrs. Nakajima many years before and was my passport in and out of the world on the other side of the printed page. I lowered my head, emptied my mind as much as possible and read from the book. The words echoed about me with a resonance that sounded like wind chimes and looked like a thousand glowworms. The room around me rippled and stretched, then returned with a *twang* to my office at Acme. Blast. This happened more and more often these days. I had once been a natural bookjumper, but the skill had faded with the years. I took a deep breath and tried again. The wind chimes and glowworms returned, and once more the room distorted around me like a barrel, then faded from view to be replaced by a kaleidoscope of images, sounds and emotions as I jumped through the boundary that separates the real from the written, the actual from the fable. With a rushing sound like distant waterfalls and a warm sensation that felt like hot rain and kittens, I was transported from Acme Carpets in Swindon to the entrance hallway of a large Georgian country house.

## 4.

### Jurisdiction

Jurisdiction is the name given to the policing agency *within* books. Working with the intelligence-gathering capabilities of Text Grand Central, the Prose Resource Operatives at Jurisdiction work tirelessly to maintain the continuity of the narrative within the pages of all the books ever written, a sometimes thankless task. Jurisdiction agents live mostly on their wits as they attempt to reconcile the author's original wishes and the reader's expectations against a strict and largely pointless set of bureaucratic guidelines laid down by the Council of Genres.

It was a spacious hallway, with deep picture windows that afforded a fine view of the extensive parklands beyond the gravel drive and perfectly planted flower beds. Inside, the walls were hung with delicate silks, the woodwork shone brightly, and the marble floor was so polished I could see myself in it. I quickly drank a pint of water, as the bookjumping process could leave me dangerously dehydrated these days, and dialed TransGenre Taxis on my mobilefootnoterphone to order a cab in a half hour's time, since they were always busy and it paid to book ahead. I then looked around cautiously. Not to check for impending danger, as this was the peaceful backstory of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. No, I was making quite sure my current Jurisdiction Cadet wasn't anywhere in sight. My overriding wish at present was not to have to deal with her until roll call had finished.

"Good morning, ma'am!" she said, appearing in front of me so abruptly I almost cried out. She spoke in the overeager manner of the terminally keen, a trait that began to annoy soon after I'd agreed to assess her suitability, twenty-four hours before.

"Do you have to jump in so abruptly?" I asked her. "You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

"Oh! I'm sorry. But I did bring you some breakfast."

"Well, in that case..." I looked into the bag she handed me and frowned. "Wait a minute--that doesn't look like a bacon sandwich."

"It isn't. It's a crispy lentil cake made with soy milk and bean curd. It cleanses the bowels. Bacon definitely *will* give you a heart attack."

"How thoughtful of you," I remarked sarcastically. "The body is a temple, right?"

"Right. And I didn't get you coffee because it raises blood pressure. I got you this beetroot-and-edelweiss energy drink."

"What happened to the squid ink and hippopotamus milk?"

"They were out."

"Look," I said, handing back the lentil animal-feed thing and the drink, "tomorrow is the third and last day of your assessment, and I haven't yet made up my mind. Do you want to be a Jurisfiction agent?"

"More than anything."

"Right. So if you want me to sign you out for advanced training, you're going to have to do as you're told. If that means killing a grammasite, recapturing an irregular verb, dressing Quasimodo or even something as simple as getting me coffee and a bacon roll, then that's what you'll do. Understand?"

"Sorry," she said, adding as an afterthought, "Then I suppose you don't want this?" She showed me a small lump of quartz crystal.

"What do I do with it?"

"You wear it. It can help retune your vibrational energy system."

"The only energy system I need right now is a bacon roll. You might be a veggie, but I'm not. I'm not *you*--you're a version of *me*. You might be into tarot and yogurt and vitamins and standing naked in the middle of crop circles with your eyes closed and your palms facing skyward, but don't think that I am as well, okay?"

She looked crestfallen, and I sighed. After all, I felt kind of responsible. Since I'd made it into print, I'd been naturally curious about meeting the fictional me, but I'd never

entertained the possibility that she might want to join Jurisfiction. But here she was--the Thursday Next from *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco*. It was mildly spooky at first, because she wasn't similar just in the way that identical twins are similar, but physically *indistinguishable* from me. Stranger still, despite *Pepys Fiasco's* being set six years before, she looked as old as my fifty-two years. Every crag and wrinkle, even the flecks of gray hair I pretended I didn't care about. For all intents and purposes, she *was* me. But only, I was at pains to point out, in facial appearance. She didn't act or dress like me; her clothes were more earthy and sustainable. Instead of my usual jeans, shirt and jacket, she wore a naturally dyed cotton skirt and a homespun crocheted pullover. She carried a shoulder bag of felt instead of my Billingham, and in place of the scarlet scrunchie holding my ponytail in place, hers was secured with a strip of hemp cloth tied in a neat bow. It wasn't by accident. After I had endured the wholly unwarranted aggression of the first four Thursday books, I'd insisted that the fifth reflect my more sensitive nature. Unfortunately, they took me a little too seriously, and Thursday5 was the result. She was sensitive, caring, compassionate, kind, thoughtful--and unreadable. *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco* sold so badly it was remaindered within six months and never made it to paperback, something I was secretly glad of. Thursday5 might have remained in unreadable retirement, too, but for her sudden wish to join Jurisfiction and "do her bit," as she called it. She'd passed her written tests and basic training and was now with me for a three-day assessment. It hadn't gone that well--she was going to have to do something pretty dramatic to redeem herself.

"By the way," I said as I had an unrelated thought, "can you knit?"

"Is this part of my assessment?"

"A simple yes or no will suffice."

"Yes."

I handed her Pickwick's half-knitted sweater. "You can finish this. The dimensions are on that piece of paper. It's a cozy for a pet," I added as Thursday5 stared at the oddly shaped stripy piece of knitting.

"You have a deformed jellyfish for a pet?"

"It's for Pickwick."

"Oh!" said Thursday5. "I'd be delighted. I have a dodo, too--she's called Pickwick5."

"You don't say."

"Yes--how did yours lose her plumage?"

"It's a long story that involves the cat next door."

"I have a cat next door. It's called...now, what was her name?"

"Cat Next Door5?" I suggested.

"That's right," she said, astonished at my powers of detection. "You've met her, then?"

I ignored her and pushed open the doors to the ballroom. We were just in time. The Bellman's daily briefing was about to begin.

Jurisfiction's offices were in the disused ballroom of Mr. and Mrs. John Dashwood's residence of Norland Park, safely hidden in the backstory of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Wagging and perhaps jealous tongues claimed that it was for "special protection," but I'd never seen any particular favors shown myself. The room was painted pale blue, and the walls, where not decorated with delicate plaster moldings, were hung with lavish gold-framed mirrors. It was here that we ran the policing agency that functioned *within* books to keep order in the dangerously flexible narrative environment. We called it Jurisfiction.

The offices of Jurisfiction had long been settled at Norland. It had been many years since they had been used as a ballroom. The floor space was liberally covered with tables, chairs, filing cabinets and piles of paperwork. Each desk had its own brass-horned footnoterphone, a typewriter and an in-tray that always seemed larger than the out. Although electronics were a daily part of life in the real world, here in fiction there was no machine so complicated that it couldn't be described in a line or two. It was a different story over in nonfiction, where they had advanced technology coming out of their ears--it was a matter of some pride that we were about eight times more efficient with half the workforce. I paused for a moment. Even after sixteen years, walking into the

Jurisdiction offices always gave me a bit of a buzz. Silly, really, but I couldn't help myself.

"Just in time!" barked Commander Bradshaw, who was standing on a table so as to be more easily seen. He was Jurisdiction's longest-serving member and onetime star of the Commander Bradshaw colonial ripping adventure stories for boys. His jingoistic and anachronistic brand of British Empire fiction wasn't read at all these days, which he'd be the first to admit was no great loss and freed him up to be the head of Jurisdiction, or Bellman, a post he was unique in having held twice. He and Mrs. Bradshaw were two of the best friends I possessed. His wife, Melanie, had been Friday and Tuesday's au pair, and even though Jenny was now ten and needed less looking after, Mel was still around. She loved our kids as if they were her own. She and Bradshaw had never had children. Not surprisingly, really, since Melanie was, and had always been, a gorilla.

"Is everyone here?" he asked, carefully scanning the small group of Jurisdiction agents.

"Hamlet's dealing with a potentially damaging outbreak of reasonable behavior inside *Othello*," said Mr. Fainset, a middle-aged man dressed in worn merchant navy garb. "He also said he needed to see Iago about something."

"That'll be about their Shakespeare spin-off play *Iago v. Hamlet*," said the Red Queen, who was actually not a real queen at all but an anthropomorphized chess piece from *Through the Looking Glass*. "Does he really think he's going to get the Council of Genres to agree to a thirty-ninth Shakespeare play?"

"Stranger things have happened." Bradshaw sighed. "Where are Peter and Jane?"

"The new feline in *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* got stage fright," said Lady Cavendish, "and after that they said they needed to deal with a troublesome brake van in *The Twin Engines*."

"Very well," said Bradshaw, tingling a small bell. "Jurisdiction meeting number 43,369 is now in session. Item One: The number of fictioneers trying to escape into the real world has increased this month. We've had seven attempts, all

of them rebuffed. The Council of Genres has made it abundantly clear that this will not be tolerated without a Letter of Transit, and anyone caught moving across or *attempting* to move across will be reduced to text on sight."

There was silence. I was the only one who crossed over on a regular basis, but no one liked the idea of reducing people to text, whether they deserved it or not. It was irreversible and the closest thing there was to death in the written world.

"I'm not saying you *have* to do that," continued Bradshaw, "and I want you to pursue all other avenues before lethal force. But if it's the only way, then that's what you'll do. Item Two: It's been six months, and there's still no sign of the final two volumes of *The Good Soldier Svejk*. If we don't hear anything more, we'll just bundle up the four volumes into one and reluctantly call it a day. Thursday, have you seen anything around the Well that might indicate they were stolen to order to be broken up for scrap?"

"None at all," I replied, "but I spoke with our opposite number over at Jurisfiktivni, and he said they'd lost it over there, too."

"That's wonderful news!" breathed Bradshaw, much relieved.

"It is?"

"Yes--it's someone else's problem. Item Three: The inexplicable departure of comedy from the Thomas Hardy novels is still a cause for great concern."

"Hadn't we put a stop to that?" asked Emperor Zhark.

"Not at all," replied Bradshaw. "We tried to have the comedy that was being leached *out* replaced by fresh comedy coming *in*, but because misery has a greater natural affinity for the Wessex novels, it always seems to gain the ascendancy. Hard to believe *Jude the Obscure* was once the most rip-roaringly funny novel in the English language, eh?"

I put up my hand.

"Yes, Thursday?"

"Do you think the Comedy genre might be mining the books for laughs? You know how those guys will happily steal and modify from anything and everywhere for even the most perfunctory of chuckles."

"It's possible, but we need hard evidence. Who wants to have



a trawl around Comedy for a Thomas Hardy funnyism we can use to prove one way or the other?"

"I will," said the Red Queen, before I could volunteer.

"Better get busy. If they *are* sucking the comedy out of *Jude*, we don't have much time. Now that the farce, rib-cracking one-liners and whimsical asides have all been removed, a continued drain on the novel's reserves of lightheartedness will place the book in a state of negative funniness. Insufferably gloomy--miserable, in fact."

We thought about it for a moment. Even until as little as thirty years ago, the whole Thomas Hardy series was actually very funny--pointlessly frivolous, in fact. As things stood at the moment, if you wanted a happy ending to anything in Hardy, you'd be well advised to read it backward.

"Item Four," continued Bradshaw, "a few genre realignments."

There was an audible sigh in the air, and a few agents lost interest. This was one of those boring-but-important items that, while of little consequence to the book in question, subtly changed the way in which it was policed. We had to know what novel was in what genre--sometimes it wasn't altogether obvious, and when a book stretched across two genres or more, it could open a jurisdictional can of worms that might have us tied up for years. We all reached for our note pads and pencils as Bradshaw stared at the list.

"Erich von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* has been moved from nonfiction to fiction," he began, leaving a pause so we could write it down, "and Orwell's *1984* is no longer *truly* fiction, so has been reallocated to nonfiction. Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* is no longer Sci-fi but Philosophy."

This was actually good news; I'd thought the same for years.

"The subgenre of Literary Smut has finally been disbanded, with *Fanny Hill* and *Moll Flanders* being transferred to Racy Novel and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to Human Drama."

We diligently wrote it all down as Bradshaw continued:

"*The History of Tom Jones* is now in Romantic Comedy, and *The Story of O* is part of the Erotic Novel genre, as are *Lolita* and *The Autobiography of a Flea*. As part of a separate genre reappraisal, Orwell's *Animal Farm* belongs not just to the

Allegorical and Political genres but has expanded to be part of Animal Drama and Juvenilia as well."

"Four genres bad, two genres good," murmured Mr. Fainset.

"I'm sorry?"

"Nothing."

"Good," said Bradshaw, stroking his large white mustache. "Item Five: The entire works of Jane Austen are down in the maintenance bay for a refit. We've diverted all the Outlander readings through a book-club boxed set, and I want someone to patrol the series until the originals are back online. Volunteers?"

"I will," I said.

"You're on cadet assessment, Thursday. Anyone else?"

Lady Margaret Cavendish put up her hand. Unusually for a resident of fiction, she had once been real. Originally a flamboyant seventeenth-century aristocratic socialite much keen on poetry, women's issues and self-publicity, our Lady Cavendish hailed from an unfair biography. Annoyed by the slurs committed, as so often to the defamed dead, she took flight to the bright lights of Jurisfiction, in which she seemed to excel, especially in the poetry form, which no one else much liked to handle.

"What would you have me do?" she asked.

"Nothing, really--just maintain a presence to make sure any mischievous character understudies think twice before they do their own dialogue or try to 'improve' anything."

Lady Cavendish shrugged and nodded her agreement.

"Item Six," said Bradshaw, consulting his clipboard again, "Falling Outlander ReadRates."

He looked at us all over his glasses. We all knew the problem but saw it more as a systemic difficulty rather than something we could deal with on a book-to-book policing basis.

"The Outlander Reading Index has dropped once again for the 1,782nd day running," reported Bradshaw, "and although there are certain books that will always be read, we are finding that more and more minor classics and a lot of general fiction are going for long periods without even being opened. Because of this, Text Grand Central is worried that bored

characters in lesser books might try to move to more popular novels for work, which will doubtless cause friction."

We were all silent, and the inference wasn't lost on any of us: The fictional characters in the BookWorld could be a jittery bunch, and it didn't take much to set off a riot.

"I can't say any more at this point," concluded Bradshaw, "as it's only a *potential* problem, but be aware of what's going on. The last thing we need right now is a band of disgruntled book-people besieging the Council of Genres demanding the right to be read. Okay, Item Seven: The MAWk-15H virus has once again resurfaced in Dickens, particularly in the death of Little Nell, which is now so uncomfortably saccharine that even our own dear, gentle, patient, noble Nell complained. I need someone to liaise with the BookWorld Communicable Textual Diseases Unit to deal with this. Volunteers?"

Foyle reluctantly put up his hand. Working for the BCTD on Bookviruses was never popular, as it required a lengthy quarantine on completion; most of Victorian melodrama was to some degree infected with MAWk-15H, and it was often blamed on Jurisfiction agents with poor hygiene.

"Item Eight: Jurisfiction recruitment. The percentage of recruits making it to full agent status is currently eight percent, down from twenty-two percent three years ago. I'm not saying that standards need to slip or anything, but Senator Jobsworth has threatened to force agents upon us if we can't recruit, and we don't want that."

We all muttered our agreement. Just recently a few cadets had been making themselves conspicuous by their poor performance. None of us wanted to be understaffed, but then neither did we want the service swamped with knuckleheads.

"So," continued Bradshaw, "on the basis that poor training makes failed cadets, I want you all to think about giving them all a little more of your time."

He put down his clipboard.

"That's it for now. Do the best you can, keep me informed as to progress and, as regards health and safety, we've had the welcome news that you can ignore safety practices to save time, but you *must* complete the paperwork. Good luck, and...let's be *careful* out there."

Everyone started to talk among themselves, and after I told Thursday5 to wait at my desk, I threaded my way through the small gathering to speak to Bradshaw. I caught up with him as he was heading back to his desk.

"You want me to report on the Jane Austen refit?" I asked him. "Any par tic ular reason?"

Bradshaw was dressed as you might expect a colonial white hunter to dress: in a safari suit with shorts, pith helmet and a revolver in a leather holster. He didn't need to dress like that anymore, of course, but he was a man of habit.

"That was mostly misdirection," he asserted. "I *do* want you to take a gander, but there's something else I'd like you to look at--something I don't want Senator Jobsworth to know about, or at least not yet."

Senator Jobsworth was the head of the Council of Genres and a powerful man. Politics within Jurisdiction could be tricky at times, and I had to be particularly diplomatic as far as Jobsworth was concerned--I often had to cross swords with him in the debating chamber. As the only real person in fiction, my advice was often called for--but rarely welcomed.

"What do you want me to do?"

Bradshaw rubbed his mustache thoughtfully. "We've had a report of something that sounds *transfictional*."

"Another one?"

It was the name given to something that had arrived from the real world--the Outland, as it was known. I was a transfictional, of course, but the term was more usually used to refer to something or somebody that had crossed over unexpectedly.

Bradshaw handed me a scrap of paper with the title of a book on it. "I feel happier with you handling it, because you're an Outlander. Appreciate a woman who's proper flesh and blood. By the way, how's Thursday5 doing?"

"She isn't," I replied. "Her timidity will end up getting her killed. We had a run-in with a grammasite inside *Lord of the Flies* while dealing with the glasses problem, and she decided to give the Verbisoid the benefit of the doubt and a very large hug."

"What type of Verbisoid? Intransitive?"

I shook my head sadly. "Nope. *Ditransitive*."

Bradshaw whistled low. He hadn't been kidding over recruitment troubles or Senator Jobsworth's involvement. Even I knew there were at least three totally unsuitable candidates Jobsworth was pressuring us to "reappraise."

"She's lucky to have a single verb left in her body," said Bradshaw after a pause. "Give her the full three days before firing her, yes? It has to be by the book, in case she tries to sue us."

I assured him I would and moved back to my desk, where Thursday5 was sitting on the floor in the lotus position. I had a quick rummage through my case notes, which were now stacked high on my desk. In a rash moment I'd volunteered to look at Jurisfiction "cold cases," thinking that there would only be three or four. As it turned out, there were over a hundred infractions of sorts, ranging from random plot fluctuations in the *Gormenghast* trilogy to the inexplicable and untimely death of Charles Dickens, who had once lived long enough to finish *Edwin Drood*. I did as much as I had time for, which wasn't a lot.

"Right," I said, pulling on my jacket and grabbing my bag, "we're off. Stick close to me and do *exactly* as I say--even if that means killing grammasites. It's them or us."

"Them or us," repeated Thursday5 halfheartedly, slinging her felt handbag over her shoulder in exactly the same way as I did. I stopped for a moment and stared at my desk. It had been rearranged.

"Thursday?" I said testily. "Have you been doing feng shui on my desk again?"

"It was more of a *harmonization*, really," she replied somewhat sheepishly.

"Well, don't."

"Why not?"

"Just...just *don't*."

## 5.

### Training Day

The BookWorld was a minefield for the unwary, so apprenticeships were essential. We'd lost more agents through poor training than were ever taken by grammasites. A foot wrong in the imaginatively confusing world of fiction could see the inexperienced Jurisfiction Cadet misspelled, conjugated or reduced to text. My tutor had been the first Miss Havisham, and I like to think it was her wise counsel that had allowed me to survive as long as I did. Many cadets didn't. The average life expectancy for a raw recruit in BookWorld was about forty-seven chapters.

We stepped outside the colonnaded entrance of Norland Park and basked in the warmth of the sunshine. The story had long ago departed with the Dashwood family to Devon, and this corner of *Sense and Sensibility* was quiet and unused. To one side a saddled horse was leaning languidly against a tree with a hound sitting on the ground quite near it. Birds sang in the branches, and clouds moved slowly across the heavens. Each cloud was identical, of course, and the sun didn't track across the sky as it did back home, and, come to think of it, the birdsong was on a twenty-second loop. It was what we called "narrative economics," the bare amount of description necessary to create a scene. The Book-World was like that--mostly ordered, and without the rich texture that nature's randomness brings to the real world.

We sat in silence for a few minutes to wait for my taxi. I was thinking about the mostly bald Pickwick, Friday's ChronoGuard pre sen ta tion, Felix8's return and my perfidy to Landen. Thursday5 had no such worries--she was reading the astrology section of the BookWorld's premier newspaper, *The Word*.

After a while she said, "It's my birthday today."  
"I know."

"You do? How?"

"Never mind."

"Listen to what it says in the horoscopes: 'If it is your birthday, there may be an increased amount of mail. Expect gifts, friendly salutations from people and the occasional surprise. Possibility of cake.' That's so weird--I wonder if any of it will come true?"

"I've no idea. Have you noticed the amount of Mrs. Danvers you see wandering around these days?"

I mentioned this because a pair of them had been seen at Norland Park that morning. They were becoming a familiar sight in fiction, hanging around popular books out of sight of the reader, looking furtive and glaring malevolently at anyone who asked what they were up to. The excess of Mrs. Danvers in the Book-World was easily explained. Generics, or characters-in-waiting, are created blank, without any personality or gender, and are then billeted in novels until called up for training in character schools. From there they are sent either to populate the books being built or to replace characters who are due for retirement or replacement. The problem is, generics have a chameleonic habit of assimilating themselves to a strong leading character, and when six thousand impressionable generics were lodged inside *Rebecca*, all but eight became Mrs. Danvers, the creepy house keeper of Manderley. Since creepy house keepers are not much in demand these days, they were mostly used as expendable drones for the Mispeling Vyrus Farst Respons Groop or, more sinisterly, for riot control and any other civic disturbances. At Jurisdiction we were concerned that they were becoming another layer of policing, answerable only to the Council of Genres, something that was stridently denied.

"Mrs. Danvers?" repeated Thursday5, studying a pullout guide to reading tea leaves. "I've got one or two in my books, but I think they're meant to be there."

"Tell me," I said by way of conversation, "is there any aspect of the BookWorld that you'd like to learn about as part of your time with me?"

"Well," she said after a pause, "I'd like to have a go and see what it's like inside a story during a recitation in the oral

tradition--I've heard it's really kind of *buzzing*."

She was right. It was like sweaty live improv theater--anything could happen.

"No way," I said, "and if I hear that you've been anywhere near OralTrad, you'll be confined to *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco*. It's not like books where everything's laid out and orderly. The oral tradition is *dynamic* like you've no idea. Change anything in there and you will, quite literally, give the narrator an aneurysm."

"A *what*?"

"A brain hemorrhage. The same can be said of Poetry. You don't want to go hacking around in there without a clear head on your shoulders."

"Why?"

"It's like a big emotion magnifier. All feelings are exacerbated to a dangerous level. You can find things out about yourself that you never knew--or never wanted to know. We have a saying: 'You can lose yourself in a book, but you find yourself in Poetry.' It's like being able to see yourself when drunk."

"Aha," she said in a quiet voice.

There was a pause.

"You've never been drunk, have you?"

She shook her head. "Do you think I should try it?"

"It's overrated."

I had a thought. "Have you ever been up to the Council of Genres?"

"No."

"A lamentable omission. That's where we'll go first."

I pulled out my mobilefootnoterphone and called TransGenre Taxis to see where my cab had gone. The reason for a taxi was not altogether obvious to Thursday5, who, like most residents of the BookWorld, could bookjump to any novel previously visited with an ease I found annoying. My *intrafictional* bookjumping was twenty times better than my *transfictional* jumps, but even then a bit ropery. I needed to read a full paragraph to get in, and if I didn't have the right section in my TravelBook, then I had to walk via the Great Library or get a taxi--as long as one was available.



"Wouldn't it be quicker just to bookjump?" asked Thursday5 with annoying directness.

"You young things are always in a hurry, aren't you?" I replied. "Besides, it's more dignified to walk--and the view is generally better. However," I added with a sense of deflated ego, "in the absence of an available cab, we shall."

I pulled out my TravelBook, turned to the correct page and jumped from *Sense and Sensibility* to the Great Library.

## 6.

### The Great Library and Council of Genres

The Textual Sieve was designed and constructed by JurisTech, the technological arm of Jurisfiction. The Textual Sieve is a fantastically useful and mostly unexplained device that allows the user to "sieve" or "strain" text in order to isolate a specified search string. Infinitely variable, a well-tuned Textual Sieve on "full opaque" can rebuff an entire book, but set to "fine" can delicately remove a spiderweb from a half-million-word novel.

I found myself in a long, dark, wood-paneled corridor lined with bookshelves that reached from the richly carpeted floor to the vaulted ceiling. The carpet was elegantly patterned, and the ceiling was decorated with rich moldings that depicted scenes from the classics, each cornice supporting the marble bust of an author. High above me, spaced at regular intervals, were finely decorated circular apertures through which light gained entry and reflected off the polished wood, reinforcing the serious mood of the library. Running down the center of the corridor was a long row of reading tables, each with a green-shaded brass lamp. In both directions the corridor vanished into darkness with no de-finable end.

I had first entered the Great Library sixteen years ago, and the description of it hadn't altered by so much as a word. Hundreds of miles of shelves containing not every single book but every single *edition* of every book. Anything that had been published in the real world had a counterpart logged somewhere within its endless corridors.

Thursday5 was nearby and joined me to walk along the corridor, making our way toward the crossover section right at the heart of the library. But the thing to realize was that it wasn't in any sense of the word *real*, any more than the rest of the Book-World was. The library was as nebulous as the books it contained; its form was decided not only by the base

description but my *interpretation* of what a Great Library might look like. Because of this the library was as subtly changeable as my moods. At times dark and somber, at others light and airy. Reading, I had learned, was as creative a process as writing, sometimes more so. When we read of the dying rays of the setting sun or the boom and swish of the incoming tide, we should reserve as much praise for ourselves as for the author. After all, the reader is doing all the work--the writer might have died long ago.

We approached another corridor perpendicular to the one we had just walked down. In the middle of the crossway was a large, circular void with a wrought-iron rail and a spiral staircase bolted securely to one side. We walked over to the handrail and peered down. Not more than thirty feet below us, I could see another floor, exactly like this one. In the middle of that floor was another circular void through which I could see another floor, and another and another, and so on to the depths of the library. It was the same above us.

"Twenty-six floors for the published works," replied Thursday5 as I caught her eye and raised an eyebrow quizzically, "and twenty-six subbasements where books are actually constructed--the Well of Lost Plots."

I beckoned her to the ornate wrought-iron elevator and pressed the call button. We got into the elevator, I drew the gates shut with a clatter, and the electric motors whined as we headed upward. Because there are very few authors whose names begin with Q, X and Z, floors seventeen, twenty-four and twenty-six were relatively empty and thus free for other purposes. The seventeenth floor housed the Mispeling Vyrus Farst Respons Groop, the twenty-fourth floor was used essentially for storage, and the twenty-sixth was where the legislative body that governs the BookWorld had taken up residence: the Council of Genres.

This was a floor unlike any other in the Great Library. Gone were the dark wood, molded plaster ceilings and busts of long-dead writers, and in their place was a light, airy working space with a roof of curved wrought iron covered in glass through which we could see the clouds and sky. I beckoned Thursday5 to a large picture window in an area to one side of

the corridor. There were a few chairs scattered about, and it was a restful spot, designed so that overworked CofG employees could relax for a moment. I had stood here with my own mentor, the first Miss Havisham, almost sixteen years previously.

"The Great Library looks smaller from the outside," observed Thursday5, staring out the window at the rain-streaked exterior.

She was right. The corridors in the library below could be as long as two hundred miles in each direction, expandable upon requirements, but from the outside the library looked more akin to the Chrysler Building, liberally decorated with stainless-steel statuary and measuring less than two hundred yards along each face. And even though we were only on the twenty-sixth floor, it looked a great deal higher. I had once been to the top of the 120-story Goliath Tower at Goliathopolis, and this seemed easily as high as that.

"The other towers?" she asked, still staring out the window. Far below us were the treetops of a deep forest flecked with mist, and scattered around at varying distances were other towers just like ours.

"The nearest one is German," I said, "and behind those are French and Spanish. Arabic is just beyond them--and that one over there is Welsh."

"Oh," said Thursday5, staring at the green foliage far below.

"The Council of Genres looks after the Fictional Legislature," I said, walking down the corridor to the main assembly chamber. It had become busier since we'd arrived, with various clerks moving around holding file folders, reports and so forth. I had thought red tape was bad in the real world, but in the paper world it was everything. I'd come to realize over the years that anything created by mankind had error, mischief and bureaucratic officialdom hardwired at inception, and the fictional world was no different.

"The council governs dramatic conventions, strictly controls the use of irony, legislates on word use and, through the Book Inspectorate, decides which novels are to be published and which ones scrapped."

We had arrived at a viewing gallery overlooking the main

debating chamber, which was a spacious hall of white marble with an arched roof suspended by riveted iron girders. There was a raised dais at the back surmounted by a central and ornately carved chair flanked on each side by four smaller ones. A lectern for the speaker was in front of that, and facing both the lectern and the dais was a horse shoe pattern of desks for the representatives of the various genres. The back wall of the chamber was decorated with a vast mosaic representing the theoretical positions of the genres as they hung in the Nothing. The only other item of note in the debating chamber was the Read-O-Meter, which gave us a continually updated figure of just how many books had been read over the previous twenty-four hours. This instrument was a constant reminder of the falling ReadRates that had troubled the BookWorld over the past five years, and every time the numbers flopped over--and they did every five seconds--the number went *down*. Sometimes in depressingly large amounts. There was someone speaking volubly at the lectern, and the debating chamber was less than a third full.

"The main genres are seated at the front," I explained, "and the subgenres radiate out behind them, in order of importance and size. Although the CofG oversees broad legislative issues, each individual genre can make its own decision on a local level. They all field a senator to appear before the council and look after their own interests--sometimes the debating chamber resembles something less like a seat of democracy and more like plain old horse trading."

"Who's talking now?" she asked as a new member took the podium. He looked as though he hadn't brushed his hair that morning, was handsome if a bit dim-looking, had no shoes and was wearing a shirt split open to the waist.

"That'll be Speedy Muffler, the senator from the Racy Novel genre, although I suspect that might not be his real name."

"They have a senator?"

"Of course. Every genre has at least one, and depending on the popularity of subgenres, they might have several. Thriller which is subgenred into political, Spy and Adventure, has three. Comedy at the last count had six; Crime has twelve."

"I see. So what's Racy Novel's problem?"

"It's a border dispute. Although each book exists on its own and is adrift in the intragenre space known as the Nothing, the books belonging to the various genres clump together for mutual protection, free trade of ideas and easy movement of characters."

"I get it. Books of a feather flock together, yes?"

"Pretty much. Sensibly, Thriller was placed next door to Crime, which itself is bordered by Human Drama--a fine demonstration of inspired genreography for the very best mutual improvement of both."

"And Racy Novel?"

"Some idiot placed it somewhat recklessly between Ecclesiastical and Feminist, with the tiny principality of Erotica to the far north and a buffer zone with Comedy to the south comprising the subcrossover genre of Bedroom Farce/Bawdy Romp. Racy Novel gets along with Comedy and Erotica fine, but Ecclesiastical and Feminist really don't think Racy Novel is worthy of a genre at all and often fire salvos of long-winded intellectual dissent across the border, which might do more damage if anyone in Racy Novel could understand them. For its part, Racy Novel sends panty-raiding parties into its neighbors, which wasn't welcome in Feminist and even less in Ecclesiastical--or was it the other way around? Anyway, the whole deal might have escalated into an all-out genre war without the Council of Genres stepping in and brokering a peace deal. The CofG would guarantee Racy Novel's independence as long as it agreed to certain...sanctions."

"Which were?"

"An import ban on metaphor, characterization and competent description. Speedy Muffler is a bit of a megalomaniac, and both Feminist and Ecclesiastical thought containment was better than out-and-out conflict. The problem is, Racy Novel claims that this is worse than a slow attritional war, as these sanctions deny it the potential of literary advancement beyond the limited scope of its work."

"I can't say I'm very sympathetic to that cause."

"It's not important that you are--your role in Jurisfiction is only to defend the status--"

I stopped talking, as something seemed to be going on down

in the debating chamber. In a well-orchestrated lapse of protocol, delegates were throwing their ballot papers around, and among the jeering and catcalls Muffler was struggling to make himself heard. I shook my head sadly.

"What is it?"

"Something that Racy Novel has been threatening for some time--they've claimed to have developed and tested a...dirty bomb."

"A what?"

"It's a tightly packed mass of inappropriate plot devices, explicit suggestions and sexual scenes of an expressly gratuitous nature. The 'dirty' elements of the bomb fly apart at a preset time and attach themselves to any unshielded prose. Given the target, it has the potential for untold damage. A well-placed dirty bomb could scatter poorly described fornication all across drab theological debate or drop a wholly unwarranted scene of a sexually exploitative nature right into the middle of *Mrs. Dalloway*."

Even Thursday5 could see this was not a good thing. "Would he do that?"

"He just might. Senator Muffler is as mad as a barrel of skunks, and the inclusion of Racy Novel in the Council of Genres' definition of the 'Axis of Unreadable' along with Misery Memoirs and Pseudointellectual Drivel didn't help matters a bit. It'll be all over the BookWorld by nightfall, mark my words--the papers love this kind of combative, saber-rattling crap."

"Ms. Next!" came an annoying, high-pitched voice.

I turned to find a small weasel of a man with pinched features, dressed in robes and with a goodly retinue of self-important assistants stacked up behind him.

"Good morning, Senator," I said, bowing as protocol demanded. "May I introduce my apprentice, Thursday5? Thursday5, this is Senator Jobsworth, director-general of the CofG and head of the Pan-Genre Treaty Organization."

"Sklub," gulped Thursday5, trying to curtsy, bob and bow all at the same time. The senator nodded in her direction, then dismissed everyone before beckoning me to join him at the large picture window.

"Ms. Next," he said in a quiet voice, "how are things down at Jurisdiction?"

"Underfunded as usual," I replied, well used to Jobsworth's manipulative ways.

"It needn't be so," he replied. "If I can count on your support for policy direction in the near future, I am sure we can rectify the situation."

"You are too kind," I replied, "but I will judge my decisions on what is best for the BookWorld as a whole, rather than the department I work in."

His eyes flashed angrily. Despite his being the head of the council, policy decisions still had to be made by consensus--and it annoyed the hell out of him.

"With Outlander ReadRates almost in free fall," continued Jobsworth with a snarl, "I'd have thought you'd be willing to compromise on those precious scruples of yours."

"I don't compromise," I told him resolutely, repeating, "I base my decisions on what is best for the BookWorld."

"Well," said Jobsworth with an insincere smile, "let's hope you don't regret any of your decisions. Good day."

And he swept off with his entourage at his heels. His threats didn't frighten me; he'd been making them--and I'd been ignoring them--for almost as long as we'd known each other.

"I didn't realize you were so close to Senator Jobsworth," said Thursday5 as soon as she had rejoined me.

"I have a seat at the upper-level policy-directive meetings as the official LBOCS. Since I'm an Outlander, I have powers of abstract and long-term thought that most fictioneers can only dream about. The thing is, I don't generally toe the line, and Jobsworth doesn't like that."

"Can I ask a question?" asked Thursday5 as we took the elevator back down into the heart of the Great Library.

"Of course."

"I'm a little confused over how the whole imaginotransference technology works. I mean, how do books *here* get to be read out *there*?"

I sighed. Cadets were supposed to come to me for assessment when they already knew the basics. This one was as green as *Brighton Rock*. The elevator stopped on the third



floor, and I pulled open the gates. We stepped out into one of the Great Library's endless corridors, and I waved a hand in the direction of the bookshelves.

"Okay: imaginotransference. Did any of your tutors tell you even vaguely how the reader-writer thing actually *works*?"

"I think I might have been having a colonic that morning."

I moved closer to the shelves and beckoned her to follow. As I came to within a yard of the books, I could feel their influence warm me like a hot radiator. But it wasn't heat I was feeling; it was the warmth of a good story, well told. A potpourri of jumbled narrative, hovering just above of the books like morning mist on a lake. I could actually feel the emotions, hear the whispered snatches of conversation and see the images that momentarily broke free of the gravity that bound them to the story.

"Can you feel that?" I whispered.

"Feel what?"

I sighed. Fictional people were less attuned to *story*; it was rare indeed that anyone in the BookWorld actually read a book--unless the narrative called for it.

"Place your hands gently against the spines."

She did as I asked, and after a moment's puzzlement she smiled.

"I can hear voices," she whispered back, trying not to break the moment, "and a waterfall. And joy, betrayal, laughter--and a young man who has lost his hat."

"What you're feeling is the raw imaginotransference energy, the method by which all books are dispersed into the reader's imagination. The books we have in the Outland are no more similar to these than a photograph is to the subject--these books are *alive*, each one a small universe unto itself--and by throughputting some of that energy from here to their counterparts in the real world, we can transmit the story direct to the reader."

Thursday took her hand from the books and experimented to see how far out she had to go before losing the energy. It was barely a few inches.

"Throughputting? Is that where Textual Sieves come into it?"

"No. I've got to go and look at something for Bradshaw, so

we'll check out core containment--it's at the heart of the imaginotransference technology."

We walked a few yards up the corridor, and after carefully consulting the note Bradshaw had given me, I selected a book from the bewildering array of the same title in all its various incarnations. I opened the volume and looked at the stats page, which blinked up a real-time Outland ReadRate, a total of the editions still in existence and much else besides.

"The 1929 book-club deluxe leatherbound edition with nine copies still in circulation from a total of twenty-five hundred," I explained, "and with no readers actually making their way through it. An ideal choice for a bit of training."

I rummaged in my bag and brought out what looked like a large-caliber flare pistol.

Thursday5 regarded me nervously.

"Are you expecting trouble?"

"I *always* expect trouble."

"Isn't that a TextMarker?" she asked, her confusion understandable, because this wasn't officially a weapon at all. These were generally used to mark the text of a book from within so an agent could be extracted in an emergency. Once an essential piece of equipment, they were carried less and less as the mobilefootnoterphone had made such devices redundant.

"It was," I replied, breaking open the stubby weapon and taking a single brass cartridge from a small leather pouch. "But I've modified it to take an eraserhead."

I slipped the cartridge in, snapped the pistol shut and put it back in my bag. The eraserhead was just one of the many abstract technologies that JurisTech built for us. Designed to sever the bonds between letters in a word, it was a devastating weapon to anyone of textual origin--a single blast from one of these and the unlucky recipient would be nothing but a jumbled heap of letters and a bluish haze. Its use was strictly controlled--Jurisfiction agents only.

"Gosh," said Thursday after I'd explained it to her. "I don't carry any weapons at all."

"I'd so love not to have to," I told her, and with the taxi still nowhere in sight, I passed the volume across to her. "Here," I

said, "let's see how good you are at taking a passenger into a book."

She accepted the novel without demur, opened it and started to read. She had a good speaking voice, fruity and expressive, and she quickly began to fade from view. I grabbed hold of her cuff so as not to be left behind, and she instantly regained her solidity; it was the library that was now faded and indistinct. Within a few more words, we had traveled into our chosen book. The first thing I noticed as we arrived was that the chief protagonist's feet were on fire. Worse still, *he* hadn't noticed.

## A Probe Inside *Pinocchio*

Although the idea of using footnotes as a communication medium was suggested by Dr. Faustus as far back as 1622, it wasn't until 1856 that the first practical footnoterphone was demonstrated. The first transgenre trunk line between Human Drama and Crime was opened in 1915, and the network has been expanded and improved ever since. Although the system is far from complete, with many books still having only a single payfootnoterpayphone, on the outer reaches of the known BookWorld many books are without any coverage at all.

It was *Pinocchio*, of course, I'd know that nose anywhere. As we jumped into the toy workshop on page 26, the wooden puppet--Geppetto's or Collodi's creation, depending on which way you looked at it--was asleep with his feet on a brazier. The workbench was clean and tidy. Half-finished wooden toys filled every available space, and all the woodworking tools were hung up neatly upon the wall. There was a cot in one corner, a sideboard in another, and the floor was covered with curly wood shavings, but there was no sawdust or dirt. The fictional world was like that, a sort of narrative shorthand that precluded any of the shabby grotteness and *texture* that gives the real world its richness.

*Pinocchio* was snoring loudly. Comically, almost. His feet were smoldering, and within a few lines it would be morning and he would have nothing left but charred stumps. He wasn't the only person in the room. On the sideboard were two crickets watching the one-day test match on a portable TV. One was wearing a smoking jacket and a pillbox hat and held a cigarette in a silver holder, and the other had a broken antennae, a black eye and one leg in a sling.

"The name's Thursday Next," I announced to them both, holding up my Jurisfiction badge, and this is...Thursday Next."

"Which is the real one?" asked the cricket in the pillbox hat--somewhat tactlessly, I thought.

"I am," I replied through gritted teeth. "Can't you tell?"

"Frankly, no," replied the cricket, looking at the pair of us in turn. "So...which is the one that does naked yoga?"

"That would be me," said Thursday5 brightly.

I groaned audibly.

"What's the matter?" she asked, amused by my prudishness. "You should try it someday. It's relaxing and very empowering."

"I don't do yoga," I told her.

"Take it up and drop the bacon sandwiches and it will put ten years on your life."

The cricket, who spoke in a clipped accent reminiscent of Noel Coward's, folded up his paper and said, "We don't often get visitors, you know--the last lot to pass through this way was the Italian Translation Inspectorate making sure we were keeping to the spirit of the original."

The cricket had a sudden thought and indicated the damaged cricket sitting next to him. "How rude could I be? This is Jim 'Bruises' McDowell, my stunt double."

Bruises looked as though the stunt sequence with the mallet hadn't gone quite as planned.

"Hello," said the stunt cricket with an embarrassed shrug. "I had an accident during training. Some damn fool went and moved the crash mat." As he said it, he looked at the other cricket, who did nothing but puff on his cigarette and preen his antennae in a nonchalant fashion.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said by way of conversation--a good relationship with the characters within the BookWorld was essential in our work. "Have you been read recently?"

The cricket in the pillbox hat suddenly looked embarrassed.

"The truth is," he said awkwardly, "we've *never* been read. Not once in seventy-three years. Deluxe book-club editions are like that--just for show. But if we *did* have a reading, we'd all be primed and set to go."

"I can do a lot more than the 'being hit with the mallet' stunt," added Bruises excitedly. "Would you like me to set myself on fire and fall out of a window? I can wave my arms

very convincingly."

"No thanks."

"Shame," replied Bruises wistfully. "I'd like to broaden my skills to cover car-to-helicopter transfers and being dragged backwards by a horse--whatever that is."

"When the last of the nine copies of this book have gone," pointed out the cricket, "we can finally come off duty and be reassigned. I'm studying for the lead in *Charlotte's Web*."

"Do you know of any other books that require stunt crickets?" asked Bruises hopefully. "I've been practicing the very dangerous and not-at-all-foolhardy leap over seventeen motorcycles in a double-decker bus."

"Isn't it meant to be the other way around?"

"I told you it seemed a bit rum," said the cricket as Bruises' shoulders sagged. "But never mind all that," he added, returning his attention to me. "I suppose you're here about...the *thing*?"

"We are, sir. Where is it?"

The cricket pointed with three of his legs at a pile of half-finished toys in the corner and, thus rendered lopsided, fell over. His stunt double laughed until the cricket glared at him dangerously.

"It appeared unannounced three days ago--quite ruined my entrance."

"I thought you'd never been read?"

"*Rehearsals*, dahling. I do like to keep the thespian juices fresh--and Bruises here likes to practice his celebrated 'falling from the wall after being struck by a mallet' stunt--and then the leg twitching and death throes, which he does so well."

Bruises said nothing and studied the tips of his antennae modestly.

I cautiously approached the area of the room the cricket had indicated. Half hidden behind a marionette with no head and a hobby horse in need of sanding was a dull metallic sphere about the size of a grapefruit. It had several aerials sticking out of the top and an array of lenses protruding from the front. I leaned closer and sniffed at it cautiously. I could smell the odor of corrosion and see the fine pits on the heat-streaked surface. This wasn't an errant space probe from the Sci-

ficanon; it was too well described for that. Bradshaw had been right--it was trans-fictional.

"Where do you think it's from?" asked the cricket. "We get scraps of other books blowing in from time to time when there's a WordStorm, but nothing serious. Bottom from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* sheltered here for a while during the textphoon of '32 and picked up a thing or two from Lamp-Wick, but only the odd verb or two otherwise. Is it important?"

"Not really," I replied. It was a lie, of course--but I didn't want a panic. This was anything *but* unimportant. I gently rotated the probe and read the engraved metal plate on the back. There was a serial number and a name that I recognized only too well--the Goliath Corporation. My least favorite multinational and a thorn in my side for many years. I was annoyed and heartened all at the same time. Annoyed that they had developed a machine for hurling probes inside fiction, but heartened that this was all they had managed to achieve. As I peered closer at the inert metallic ball, there was a warning chirp from my bag. I quickly dug out a small instrument and tossed it to Thursday5.

"A reader?" she said with surprise. "In here?"

"So it seems. How far away?"

She flipped the device open and stared at the flickering needle blankly. Technology was another point she wasn't that strong on. "We're clear. The reader is...er, two paragraphs ahead of us."

"Are you sure?"

She looked at the instrument again. It was a Narrative Proximity Device, designed to ensure that our intrafictional perambulations couldn't be seen by readers in the Outland. One of the odd things about the BookWorld was that when characters weren't being read, they generally relaxed and talked, rehearsed, drank coffee, watched cricket or played mah-jongg. But as soon as a reading loomed, they all leaped into place and did their thing. They could sense the reading approaching out of long experience, but we couldn't--hence the Narrative Proximity Device. Being caught up in a reading wasn't particularly desirable for a Jurisfiction agent, as it

generally caused a certain degree of confusion in the reader. I was spotted once myself--and once is once too often.

"I think so," replied Thursday, staring at the meter again. "No, wait--yes."

"A positive echo means the reader is ahead of us, a negative means...?"

"Bother," she muttered. "Paragraphs *behind* and coming this way--Ma'am, I think we're about to be *read*."

"Is it a fast reader?"

She consulted the meter once more. If the reader was fast--a fan on a reread or a bored student--then we'd be fine. A slow reader searching every word for hidden meaning and subtle nuance and we might have to jump out until whoever it was had passed.

"Looks like a 41.3."

This was faster than the maximum throughput of the book, which was pegged at about sixteen words per second. It was a speed-reader, as likely as not reading every fifth word and skimming over the top of the prose like a stone skipping on water.

"They'll never see us. Press yourself against the wall until the reading moves through."

"Are you sure?" asked Thursday5, who had done her basic training with the old Jurisfiction adage "Better dead than read" ringing in her ears.

"You should know what a reading looks like if you're to be an asset to Jurisfiction. Besides," I added, "overcaution is for losers."

I was being unnecessarily strict. We could quite easily have jumped out or even hopped back a few pages and followed the narrative *behind* the reading, but cadets need to sail close to the wind a few times. Both the crickets were in something of a tizzy at the prospect of their first-ever reading and tried to run in several directions at once before vanishing off to their places.

"Stand still," I said as we pressed ourselves against the least-well-described part of the wall and looked again at the NPD. The needle was rising rapidly and counting off the words to what we termed "Read Zero"--the actual time and place, the



comprehension singularity, where the story was actually being read.

There was a distant hum and a rumble as the reading approached. Then came a light buzz in the air like static and an increased heightening of the senses as the reader took up the descriptive power of the book and translated it into his or her own unique interpretation of the events--channeled from here through the massive imaginotransference Storycode Engines back at Text Grand Central and into the reader's imagination. It was a technology of almost incalculable complexity, which I had yet to fully understand. But the beauty of the whole process was that the reader in the Outland never suspected there was any sort of process at all--the act of reading was to most people, myself included, as natural as breathing.

Geppetto's woodworking tools started to jiggle on the workbench, and a few of the wood shavings started to drift across the floor, gaining more detail as they moved. I frowned. Something wasn't right. I had expected the room to gain a small amount of increased reality as the reader's imagination bathed it in the power of his or her own past experiences and interpretations, but as the trembling and warmth increased, I noticed that this small section of Collodi's eighteenth-century allegorical tale was being raised into an unprecedented level of descriptive power. The walls, which up until then had been a blank wash of color, suddenly gained texture, a myriad of subtle hues and even areas of damp. The window frames peeled and dusted up, the floor moved and undulated until it was covered in flagstones that even I, as an Outlander, would not be able to distinguish from real ones. As Pinocchio slept on, the reading suddenly swelled like a breaking ocean roller and crossed the room in front of us, a crest of heightened reality that moved through us and imparted a warm feeling of well-being. But more than that, a rare thing in fiction, a delicate potpourri of *smells*. Freshly cut wood, cooking, spice, damp--and Pinocchio's scorched legs, which I recognized were carved from cherry. There was more, too--a strange jumble of faces, a young girl laughing and a derelict castle in the moonlight. The smells grew stronger, to the point where I

could taste them in my mouth, the dust and grime in the room seemingly accentuated until there was a faint hiss and a *ploof* sound and the enhanced feelings dropped away in an instant. Everything once more returned to the limited reality we had experienced when we arrived--the bare description necessary for the room to be Geppetto's workshop. I nudged Thursday5, who opened her eyes and looked around with relief.

"What was *that*?" she asked, staring at me in alarm.

"We were *read*," I said, a little rattled myself. Whoever it was could not have failed to see us.

"I've been read many times," murmured Thursday5, "from perfunctory skim to critical analysis, and nothing ever felt like *that*."

She was right. I'd stood in for GSD knows how many characters over the years, but even I'd never felt such an in-depth reading.

"Look," she said, holding up the Narrative Proximity Device. The read-through rate had peaked at an unheard-of 68.5.

"That's not possible," I muttered. "The imaginotransference bandwidth doesn't support readings of that depth at such a speed."



**The reading suddenly swelled like a breaking ocean  
roller  
and crossed the room in front of us.**

"Do you think they saw us?"

"I'm sure of it," I replied, my ears still singing and a strange woody taste still in my mouth. I consulted the NPD again. The reader was now well ahead of us and tearing through the prose toward the end of the book.

"Goodness!" exclaimed the cricket, who looked a little flushed and spacey when he reappeared along with his stunt double a few minutes later. "That was every bit as exhilarating as I thought it would be--and I didn't dry. I was excellent, wasn't I?"

"You were just *wonderful*, darling," said his stunt double. "The whole of Allegorical Juvenilia will be talking about you--one for the envelope, I think."

"And you, sir," returned the cricket, "that fall from the wall--*simply* divine."

But self-congratulatory crickets didn't really concern me right now, and even the Goliath probe was momentarily forgotten.

"A *Superreader*," I breathed. "I've heard the legends but thought they were nothing more than that, tall tales from burned-out text jockeys who'd been mainlining on irregular verbs."

"Superreader?" echoed Thursday<sup>5</sup> inquisitively, and even the crickets stopped congratulating each other on a perfect performance and leaned closer to listen.

"It's a reader with an unprecedented power of comprehension, someone who can pick up every subtle nuance, all the inferred narrative and deeply embedded subtext in one-tenth the time of normal readers."

"That's good, right?"

"Not really. A dozen or so Superreads could strip all the meaning out of a book, leaving the volume a tattered husk with little characterization and only the thinnest of plots."

"So...most Daphne Farquitt novels have been subjected to a Superreader?"

"No, they're just bad."

I thought for a moment, made a few notes in the pad I kept in my pocket and then picked up the Outlander probe. I tried

to call Bradshaw to tell him but got only his answering machine. I placed the probe in my bag, recalled that I was also here to tell Thursday5 something about the imaginotransference technology and turned to the crickets.

"Where's the core-containment chamber?"

"*Cri-cri-cri*," muttered the cricket, thinking hard. "I think it's one of the doors off the kitchen."

"Right."

I bade farewell to the crickets, who had begun to bicker when the one with the pillbox hat suggested it was high time he did his own stunts.

"I say, do you mind?" inquired Pinocchio indolently, neither opening his eyes nor removing his feet from the brazier. "Some of us are trying to get some shut-eye."

## Julian Sparkle

Standard-issue equipment to all Jurisfiction agents, the dimensionally ambivalent TravelBook contains information, tips, maps, recipes and extracts from popular or troublesome novels to enable speedier intrafiction travel. It also contains numerous JurisTech gadgets for more specialized tasks, such as an MV Mask, TextMarker and Eject-O-Hat. The TravelBook's cover is read-locked to each individual operative and contains a standard emergency alert and autodestruct mechanism.

We entered the kitchen of Geppetto's small house. It had a sort of worthy austerity about it but was clean and functional. A cat was asleep next to a log basket, and a kettle sang merrily to itself on the range. But we weren't the only people in the kitchen. There were two other doors leading off, and in front of each was a bored-looking individual sitting on a three-legged stool. In the center of the room was what appeared to be a quiz-show host dressed in a gold lame suit. He had a fake tan that was almost orange, was weighed down with heavy gold jewelry, and had a perfectly sculpted hairstyle that looked as though it had been imported from the fifties.

"Ah!" he said as soon as he saw us. "Contestants!"

He picked up his microphone.

"Welcome," he said with faux bonhomie, showing acres of perfect white teeth, "to *Puzzlemania*, the popular brain game. I'm your host, Julian Sparkle."

He smiled at us and an imaginary audience and beckoned Thursday5 closer, but I indicated for her to stay where she was.

"I can do this!" she exclaimed.

"No," I whispered. "Sparkle might *seem* like an innocuous game-show host, but he's a potential killer."

"I thought you said overcaution was for losers?" she returned, attempting to make up for the bacon-roll debacle.

"Besides, I can look after myself."

"Then be my guest," I said with a smile. "Or, rather, you can be *his* guest."

My namesake turned to Sparkle and walked up to a mark on the floor that he had indicated. As she did so, the lights in the room dimmed, apart from a spotlight on the two of them. There was a short blast of applause, seemingly from nowhere.

"So, Contestant Number One, what's your name, why are you in Geppetto's kitchen, and where do you come from?"

"My name's Thursday Next-5, I want to visit the core-containment chamber as part of a training mission, and I'm from *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco*."

"Well, then, if you can *contain* your excitement, you could have a prize *visited* upon you--fail and it might well be a *fiasco*."

Thursday5 blinked at him uncomprehendingly.

"*Contain* your excitement...prize *visited*...not a *fiasco*?" repeated Sparkle, trying to get her to understand his appalling attempts at humor.

She continued to stare at him blankly.

"Never mind. All righty, then. Ms. Next who wants to visit core containment, today we're going to play...Liars and Tigers."

He indicated the two doors leading off the kitchen, each with a bored-looking individual staring vacantly into space in front of it.

"The rules are very simple: You have two identical doors. Behind one is the core-containment chamber you seek, and behind the other...is a tiger."

The confident expression dropped from Thursday5's face, and I hid a smile.

"A what?" she asked.

"A tiger."

"A real one or a written one?"

"It's the same thing. Guarding each door is an individual, one who always tells the truth and another who always lies. You can't know which is which, nor which door is guarded by whom--and you have one question, to one guard, to discover the correct door. Ms. Next, are you ready to play Liars and

Tigers?"

"A *tiger*? A real tiger?"

"All eight feet of it." Julian smiled, enjoying himself again. "Teeth one end, tail the other, claws at all four corners. Are you ready?"

"If it's just the same to you," she said politely, "I'll be getting on my way."

In a flash, Sparkle had pulled out a shiny automatic and pressed it hard into her cheek.

"You're going to play the game, Next," he growled. "Get it right and you win today's super-duper prize. Get it wrong and you're tiger poo. Refuse and I play the Spread the Dopey Cow All Over the Kitchen game."

"Can't we form a circle of trust, have a cup of herbal tea and then discuss our issues?"

"That," said Sparkle softly, a maniacal glint in his eyes, "was the *incorrect* answer."

His finger tightened on the trigger, and the two guards both covered their heads. This had gone far enough.

"Wait!" I shouted.

Sparkle stopped and looked at me. "What?"

"I'll take her place."

"It's against the rules."

"Not if we play the Double-Death Tiger-Snack game."

Sparkle looked at Thursday5, then at me. "I'm not fully conversant with that one," he said slowly, eyes narrowed.

"It's easy," I replied. "I take her place, and if I lose, then you get to feed us *both* to the tiger. If I win, we both go free."

"Okay," said Sparkle, and he released Thursday5, who ran and hid behind me.

"Shoot him," she said in hoarse whisper.

"What about the herbal tea?"

"*Shoot him.*"

"That's *not* how we do things," I said in a quiet voice. "Now, just watch and listen and *learn*."

The two guards donned steel helmets, and Sparkle himself retreated to the other side of the room, where he could escape if the tiger was released. I walked up to the two individuals, who looked at me with a quizzical air and started to rub some



tiger repellent on themselves from a large tube. The doors were identical, and so were the guards. I scratched my head and thought hard, considering my question. Two doors, two guards. One guard always told the truth, one always lied--and one question to one guard to find the correct door. I'd heard of this puzzle as a kid but never thought my life might depend upon it. But hey, this was fiction. Strange, unpredictable--and *fun*.

## Core Containment

For thousands of years, OralTrad was the only Story Operating System and indeed is still in use today. The *recordable* Story Operating Systems began with ClayTablet V2.1 and went through several competing systems (WaxTablet, Papyrus, VellumPro) before merging into the award-winning SCROLL, which was upgraded eight times before being swept aside by the all new and clearly superior BOOK V1. Stable, easy to store and transport, compact and with a workable index, BOOK has led the way for nearly eighteen hundred years.

I turned to the guard on the left.

"If I asked the *other* guard," I said with some trepidation, "which was the door to the core-containment chamber, which one would he say?"

The guard thought for a moment and pointed to one of the doors, and I turned back to look at Sparkle and the somewhat concerned face of Thursday5, who was rapidly coming to terms with the idea that there was a lot of weird shit in the BookWorld that she'd no idea how to handle--such as potential tiger attacks inside *Pinocchio*.

"Have you chosen your door, Ms. Next?" asked Julian Sparkle. "Remember, if you win, you get through to core containment--and if you lose, there is a high probability of being eaten. Choose your door...wisely."

I gave a smile and grasped the handle--not on the door that had been indicated by the guard but the *other* one. I pulled it open to reveal...a flight of steps leading downward.

Sparkle's eyebrow twitched, and he grimaced momentarily before breaking once more into an insincere grin. The two guards breathed a sigh of relief and removed their helmets to mop their brows--it was clear that dealing with tigers wasn't something they much liked to do--and the tiger, itself a bit miffed, growled from behind the other door.

"Congratulations," muttered Sparkle. "You have chosen...correctly."

I nodded to Thursday5, who joined me at the doorway, leaving Sparkle and the two guards arguing over what my super-duper prize should be.

"How did you know which guard was which?" she asked in a respectful tone.

"I didn't," I replied, "and still don't. But I assumed that the guards would know who told the truth and who didn't. Since my question would *always* show me the wrong door irrespective of whom I asked, I just took the opposite of the one indicated."

"Oh!" she said, trying to figure it out. "What were they doing there anyway?"

"Sparkle and the others are what we call 'anecdotal.' Brain teasers, puzzles, jokes, anecdotes and urban legends that are in the oral tradition but not big enough to exist on their own. Since they need to be instantly retrieved, they have to be flexible and available at a moment's notice--so we billet them unseen around the various works of fiction."

"I get it," replied Thursday. "We had the joke about the centipede playing rugby with us at *Fiasco* for a while. Out of sight of the readers, of course. Total pest--we kept on tripping over his boots."

We stopped at the foot of the stairs. The room was about the size of a double garage and seemed to be constructed of riveted brass that was green with oxidization. The walls were gently curved, giving the impression that we were inside a huge barrel, and there was a hollow, cathedral-like quality to our voices. In the center of the room was a circular, waist-high bronze plinth about the size and shape of a ship's capstan, upon which two electrodes sprouted upward and then bent gently outward until they were about six inches apart. At the end of each electrode was a carbon sphere no bigger than a Ping-Pong ball, and between the two of them a languid blue arc of electricity crackled quietly to itself.

"What's that?" asked Thursday5 in a deferential whisper.

"It's the spark, the notion, the *core* of the book, the central nub of energy that binds a novel together."

We watched for a few moments as the arc of energy moved in a lazy wave between the poles. Every now and then, it would fizzle as though somehow disturbed by something.

"It moves as the crickets talk to each other upstairs," I explained. "If the book were being read, you'd really see the spark flicker and dance. I've been in the core of *Anna Karenina* when it was going full bore with fifty thousand simultaneous readings, and the effect was better than any fireworks display--a multi-stranded spark in a thousand different hues that snaked and arced out into the room and twisted around one another. A book's reason for being is to be read; the spark reflects this in a shimmering light show of dynamic proportions."

"You speak as though it were alive."

"Sometimes I think it is," I mused, staring at the spark. "After all, a story is born, it can evolve, replicate and then die. I used to go down to core containment quite a lot, but I don't have as much time for it these days."

I pointed at a pipe about the width of my arm that led out from the plinth and disappeared into the floor.

"That's the throughput pipe that takes all the readings to the Storycode Engine Floor at Text Grand Central and from there to the Outland, where they're channeled direct to the reader's imagination."

"And...all books work this way?"

"I wish. Books that are *not* within the influence of Text Grand Central have their own onboard Storycode Engines, as do books being constructed in the Well of Lost Plots and most of the vanity publishing genre."

Thursday5 looked thoughtful. "The readers are everything, aren't they?"

"Now you've got it," I replied. "*Everything.*"

We stood in silence for a moment.

"I was just thinking about the awesome responsibility that comes with being a Jurisfiction agent," I said at last. "What were you thinking about?"

"Me?"

I looked around the empty room. "Yes, you."

"I was wondering if extracting aloe vera hurt the plant."

What's that?"

She was pointing at a small round hatch that was partially hidden behind some copper tubing. It looked like something you might find in the watertight bulkhead of a submarine. Riveted and of robust construction, it had a large central lever and two locking devices farther than an arm span apart, so it could never be opened accidentally by one person.

"That leads to...*Nothing*," I murmured.

"You mean a blank wall?"

"No, a blank wall would be something. This is not *a* nothing but *the* Nothing, the Nothing by which all Somethings are defined."

She looked confused, so I beckoned her to a small porthole next to the hatch and told her to look out.

"I can't see anything," she said after a while. "It's completely black.... No, wait, I can see small pinpoints of light-like stars."

"Not stars," I told her. "*Books*. Each one adrift in the firmament and each one burning not just with the light that the author gave it upon creation but with the warm glow of being read and appreciated. The brighter ones are the most popular."

"I can see *millions* of them," she murmured, cupping her hands around her face to help her eyes penetrate the inky blackness.

"Every book is a small world unto itself, reachable only by bookjumping. See how some points of light tend to group near others?"

"Yes?"

"They're clumped together in genres, attracted by the gravitational tug of their mutual plotlines."

"And between them?"

"An abstraction where all the laws of literary theory and storytelling conventions break down--the Nothing. It doesn't support textual life and has no description, form or function."

I tapped the innocuous-looking hatch.

"Out there you'd not last a second before the text that makes up your descriptive existence was stripped of all meaning and consequence. Before bookjumping was developed, every character was marooned in his or her own novel. For many of

the books outside the influence of the Council of Genres and Text Grand Central, it's still like that. *Pilgrim's Progress* and the Sherlock Holmes series are good examples. We know roughly where they are, due to the literary influence they exert on similar books, but we still haven't figured out a way in. And until someone does, a bookjump is impossible."

I switched off the light, and we returned to Geppetto's kitchen.

"Here you go," said Julian Sparkle, handing me a cardboard box. Any sort of enmity he might have felt toward us had vanished.

"What's this?"

"Why, your prize, of course! A selection of Tupperware™ containers. Durable and with ingenious spillproof lids, they're the ideal way to keep food fresh."

"Give them to the tiger."

"He doesn't like Tupperware--the lids are tricky to get off with paws."

"Then *you* have them."

"I didn't win them," replied Sparkle with a trace of annoyance, but then he added after a moment's thought, "However, if you would like to play our Super Wizzo Double Jackpot game, we can double your prize the next time you play!"

"Good, fine--whatever," I said as a phone on the kitchen table started jangling. Julian picked it up.

"Hello? Two doors, one tiger, liar/nonliar puzzle speaking." He raised his eyebrows and grabbed a handy pen to scribble a note. "We'll be onto it right away."

He replaced the phone and addressed the two guards, who were watching him expectantly. "Scramble, lads. We're needed on a boring car journey on the M4 westbound near Lyneham."

The room was suddenly a whirl of activity. Each guard removed his door, which seemed to be on quick-release hinges, and then held it under his arm. The first guard placed his hand on the shoulder of Sparkle, who had turned his back, and the second on the shoulder of his compatriot. The tiger, now free, stood behind the second guard and placed one paw on his shoulder and with the other lifted the telephone off the

table.

"Ready?" called out Sparkle to the odd line that had formed expertly behind him.

"Yes," said the first guard.

"No," said the second.

"Growl," said the tiger, and turned to wink at us.

There was a mild concussion as they all jumped out. The fire blazed momentarily in the grate, the cat ran out of the room, and loose papers were thrown into the air. Phone call to exit had taken less than eight seconds. These guys were professionals.

Thursday5 and I, suitably impressed and still without a taxi, jumped out of *Pinocchio* and were once again in the Great Library.

She replaced the book on the shelf and looked up at me.

"Even if I *had* played Liars and Tigers," she said with a mournful sigh, "I wouldn't have been able to figure it out. I'd have been eaten."

"Not necessarily," I replied. "Even by guessing, your chances were still fifty-fifty, and that's thought favorable odds at Jurisfiction."

"You mean I have a fifty percent chance of being killed in the ser vice?"

"Consider yourself lucky. Out in the real world, despite huge advances in medical science, the chance of death remains unchanged at a hundred percent. Still, there's a bright side to the human mortality thing--at least, there is for the BookWorld."

"Which is?"

"A never-ending supply of new readers. Come on, you can jump me back to the Jurisfiction offices."

She stared at me for a moment and then said, "You're not so good at bookjumping anymore, are you?"

"Not really--but that's between you and me, yes?"

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

## The Well of Lost Plots

Due to the specialized tasks undertaken by Prose Resource Operatives, JurisTech is permitted to build gadgets deemed outside the usual laws of physics--the only department (aside from the SF genre) licensed to do so. Aside from the famed TravelBook, JurisTech is also responsible for the Textual Sieve, an extremely useful device that can do almost anything--even though its precise use, form and function are never fully explained.

As soon as we were back at the Jurisfiction offices in Norland Park, I gave Thursday5 an hour off for lunch so I could get some work done. I pulled all the files on potential transfictional probe appearances and discovered I had the only solid piece of evidence--all the rest had merely been sightings. It seemed that whenever a Goliath probe appeared, it was gone again in under a minute. The phenomenon had begun seven years ago, reached a peak eight months before and now seemed to be ebbing. Mind you, this was based on only thirty-six sightings and so couldn't be considered conclusive.

I took the information to Bradshaw, who listened carefully to my report and to what I knew about Goliath, which was quite a lot and none of it good. He nodded soberly as I spoke and, when I had finished, paused for a moment before observing, "Goliath is Outlander and well beyond our jurisdiction. I'm loath to take it to Senator Jobsworth, as he'll instigate some daft 'initiative' or something with resources that we just don't have. Is there any evidence that these probes do anything other than observe? Throwing a metal ball into fiction is one thing; moving a person between the two is quite another."

"None at all," I replied. "But it must be their intention, even if they haven't managed it yet."

"Do you think they will?"



"My uncle could do it. And if he could, then it's possible."

Bradshaw thought for a moment. "We'll keep this to ourselves for now. With our plunging ReadRates, I don't want to needlessly panic the CofG into some insane knee-jerk response. Is there a chance you could find out something from the real world?"

"I could try," I replied reflectively, "but don't hold your breath--I'm not exactly on Goliath's Christmas-card list."

"On the contrary," said Bradshaw, passing me the probe, "I'm sure they'd be overjoyed to meet someone who can travel into fiction. Can you check up on the Jane Austen refits this afternoon? Isambard was keen to show us something."

I told him I'd go down there straightaway, and he thanked me, wished me good luck and departed. I had a few minutes to spare before Thursday5 got back, so I checked the card-index databases for anything about Superreaders, of which there was frustratingly little. Most Superreader legends had their base in the Text Sea, usually from word fishermen home on leave from scrawltrawlers. The issue was complicated by the fact that one Superread is technically identical to a large quantity of simultaneous reads, so only an examination of a book's maintenance log would identify whether it had been a victim or not.

Thursday5 returned exactly on time, having spent the lunch hour in a mud bath, the details of which she felt compelled to tell me--at length. Mind you, she was a lot more relaxed than I was, so something was working. We stepped outside, and after I argued with TransGenre Taxis' dispatch for five minutes, we read our-selves to the Great Library, then took the elevator and descended in silence to the subbasements, which had been known colloquially as the Well of Lost Plots for so long that no one could remember their proper name--if they'd ever had one. It was here that books were actually *constructed*. The "laying of the spine" was the first act in the process, and after that a continuous series of work gangs would toil tirelessly on the novel, embedding plot and subtext within the fabric of the narrative. They carefully lowered in the settings and atmosphere before the characters, fresh from dialogue training and in the presence of a skilled imaginator, would record the

book onto an ImagiNoTransferoRecordingDevice ready for reading in the Outland. It was slow, manpower-intensive and costly--any Supervising Book Engineer who could construct a complex novel in the minimum of time and on bud get was much in demand.

"I was thinking," said Thursday5 as the elevator plunged downward, "about being a bit more proactive. I *would* have been eaten by that tiger, and it was, I must confess, the seventh time you've rescued me over the past day and a half."

"Eighth," I pointed out. "Remember you were attacked by that adjectivore?"

"Oh, yes. It didn't really take to my suggestion of a discussion group to reappraise the passive role of grammasites within the BookWorld, now, did it?"

"No. All it wanted was to tear the adjectives from your still-breathing body."

"Well, my point is that I think I need to be more aggressive."

"Sounds like a good plan," I replied. "If a situation arises, we'll see how you do."

The elevator stopped, and we stepped out. Down here in the Well, the subbasements looked more like narrow Elizabethan streets than corridors. It was here that purveyors of book-construction-related merchandise could be found displaying their wares in a multitude of specialty shops that would appeal to any genre, style or setting. The corridors were alive with the bustling activity of artisans moving hither and thither in the gainful pursuit of book building. Plot traders, backstoryists, hole stitchers, journeymen and generics trotted purposefully in every direction, and cartloads of prefabricated sections for protobooks were being slowly pulled down the center of the street by Pitman ponies, which are a sort of shorthand horse that doesn't take up so much room.

Most of it was salvage. In the very lowest subbasement was the Text Sea, and it was on the shores of this ocean that scrapped books were pulled apart by work gangs using nothing more re-fined than hammers, chains and muscle. The chunks of battered narrative were then dismantled by cutters, who would remove and package any salvageable items to be resold. Any idea, setting or character that was too damaged or

too dull to be reused was unceremoniously dumped in the Text Sea, where the bonds within the sentences were loosened until they were nothing but words, and then these, too, were reduced to letters and punctuation, the meaning burning off into a bluish mist that lingered near the foreshore before evaporating.

"Who are we going to see?" asked Thursday5 as we made our way through the crowded throng.

"Bradshaw wanted me to cast an eye over the Jane Austen refit," I replied. "The engineer in charge is Isambard Kingdom Bunuel, the finest and most surreal book engineer in the WOLP. When he constructed *War and Peace*, no one thought that anything of such scale and grandeur *could* be built, let alone launched. It was so large an entire subbasement had to be constructed to take it. Even now a permanent crew of twenty is needed to keep it going."

Thursday5 looked curiously around as a gang of riveters walked past, laughing loudly and talking about a spine they'd been working on.

"So once the book is built, it's moved to the Great Library?" she asked.

"If only," I replied. "Once completed and the spark has been ignited, it undergoes a rigorous twelve-point narrative safety-and-compliance regime before being studiously and penetratively test-read on a special rig. After that, the book is taken on a trial reading by the Council of Genres Book Inspectorate before being passed--or not--for publication."

We walked on and presently saw the Book Maintenance Facility hangars in the distance, rising above the low roofs of the street like the airship hangars I knew so well back home. They were always full; book maintenance carried on 24/7. After another five minutes' walk and with the street expanding dramatically to be able to encompass the vast size of the complex, we arrived outside the Book Maintenance Facility.

## The Refit

Books suffer wear and tear, just the same as hip joints, cars and reputations. For this reason all books have to go into the maintenance bay for a periodic refit, either every thirty years or every million readings, whichever comes first. For those books that suffer a high initial readership but then lose it through boredom or insufficient reader intellect, a partial refit may be in order. Salmon Thrusty's intractable masterpiece *The Demonic Couplets* has had its first two chapters rebuilt six times, but the rest is relatively unscathed.

Ever since the ProCaths had mounted a guerrilla-style attack on *Wuthering Heights* during routine maintenance, security had been increased, and tall cast-iron railings now separated the Book Maintenance Facility from the rest of the Well. Heathcliff--possibly the most hated man inside fiction--had not been harmed, partly due to the vigilance of the Jurisdiction agents who were on Heathcliff Protection Duty that day but also due to a misunderstanding of the word "guerrilla," a woeful lexicological lapse that had left five confused apes dead and the facility littered with bananas. There was now a guard house, too, and it was impossible to get in unless on official business.

"Now, here's an opportunity," I whispered to Thursday5, "to test your aggressiveness. These guys can be tricky, so you need to be firm."

"Firm?"

"Firm."

She took a deep breath, steeled herself and marched up to the guard house in a meaningful manner.

"Next and Next," she announced, passing our IDs to a guard who was sitting in a small wooden shed at the gates of the facility. "And if you cause us any trouble, we'll...not be happy. And then *you'll* not be happy, because we can do unhappy

things...to people...*sometimes*."

"I'm sorry?" said the guard, who had a large white mustache and seemed to be a little deaf.

"I said...ah, how are you?"

"Oh, we're fine, thank you, missy," replied the guard amiably. Thursday5 turned to me and gave me the thumbs-up sign, and I smiled. I actually quite liked her, but there was a huge quantity of work to be done before she might be considered Jurisdiction material. At present I was planning on assessing her "potential with retraining" and sending her back to cadet school.

I looked around as the guard stared at our identification and then at us. Above the hangars I could see tall chimneys belching forth clouds of smoke, while in the distance we could hear the ring of hammers and the rumble of machinery.

"Which one is Thursday Next?" asked the guard, staring closely at the almost identical IDs.

"Both of us," said Thursday5. "I'm Thursday5, and she's the Outlander."

"An Outlander?" repeated the guard with great interest. I glared at Thursday5. My Outlander status wasn't something I liked to bandy about.

"Hey, Bert!" he said to the other guard, who seemed to be on permanent tea break. "We've got an Outlander here!"

"No!" he said, getting up from a chair that had its seat polished to a high shine. "Get out of here!"

"What an honor!" said the first guard. "Someone from the *real* world." He thought for a moment. "Tell me, if it rains on a really hot day, do sheep shrink?"

"Is that a security question?"

"No, no," replied the guard quickly. "Bert and I were just discussing it recently."

This wasn't unusual. Characters in fiction had a very skewed view of the real world. To them the extreme elements of human experience were commonplace, as they were generally the sorts of issues that made it into books, which left the mundanities of real life somewhat obscure and mysterious. Ask a resident of the Book-World about terminal diseases, loss, gunshot trajectories, dramatic irony and problematic relatives

and he'd be more expert than you or me--quiz him on paintbrushes and he'd spend the rest of the week trying to figure out how the paint stays on the bristles until it touches another surface.

"It's *woolens* that shrink," I explained, "and it has to be *very* hot."

"I told you so," said Bert triumphantly.

"Thank you," I said, taking the security badges from the guard while I signed the ledger. He admitted us both to the facility, and almost from nowhere a bright yellow jeep appeared with a young man dressed in blue overalls and a cap sporting the BMF logo.

"Can you take us to Isambard Kingdom Bunuel?" I said as we climbed in the back.

"Yes," replied the driver without moving.

"Then would you?"

"I suppose."

The jeep moved off. The hangars were, as previously stated, of gigantic proportions. Unlike the real world, where practical difficulties in civil engineering might be a defining factor in the scale of a facility, here it was not a consideration at all. Indeed, the size of the plant could expand and contract depending on need, a little like Mary Poppins's suitcase, which was hardly surprising, as they were designed by the same person. We drove on for a time in silence.

"What's in Hangar One at the moment?" I asked the driver.

"*The Magus*."

"Still?"

Even the biggest refit never took more than a week, and John Fowles's labyrinthine-plotted masterpiece had been in there nearly five.

"It's taking longer than we thought--they removed all the plot elements for cleaning, and no one can remember how they go back together again."

"I'm not sure it will make a difference," I murmured as we pulled up outside Hangar Eight. The driver said nothing, waited until we climbed out and then drove off without a word.

To say that the interior of the hangar was vast would have

been pointless, as the Great Library, Text Grand Central and the CofG *also* had vast interiors, and continued descriptions of an increasingly hyperbolic nature would be insufferably repetitious. Suffice it to say that there was room on the hangar floor for not only Darcy's country home of Pemberley but also Rosings, Netherfield *and* Longbourn as well. They had all been hoisted from the book by a massive overhead crane so the empty husk of the novel could be checked for fatigue cracks before being fumigated for nesting grammasites and then repainted. At the same time, an army of technicians, plasterers, painters, carpenters and so forth were crawling over the houses, locations, props, furnishings and costumes, all of which had been removed for checking and maintenance.

"If this is *Pride and Prejudice*," said Thursday5 as we walked toward the Bennets' property of Longbourn, "then what are people reading in the Outland?"

The house was resting incongruously on wooden blocks laid on the hangar floor but without its grounds--they were elsewhere being tended to by a happy buzz of gardeners.

"We divert the readings to a lesser copy on a standby Storycode Engine, and people read that," I replied, nodding a greeting to the various technicians who were trying to make good the damage wrought by the last million readings or so. "The book is never *quite* as good, but the only people who might see a difference are the Austen enthusiasts and scholars. They would notice the slight dulling and lack of vitality, but, unable to come to a satisfactory answer as to why this might be so, they will simply blame themselves--a reading later in the week will once again renew their confidence in the magnificence of the novel."

We stepped inside the main doorway of Longbourn, where a similar repair gang was working on the interior. They had only just gotten started, and from here it was easier to see the extent of the corrosion. The paintwork was dull and lifeless, the wallpaper hung off the wall in long strips, and the marble fireplace was stained and darkened by smoke. Everything we looked at seemed tired and worn.

"Oh, mercy!" came a voice behind us, and we turned to find Mrs. Bennet dressed in a threadbare poke bonnet and shawl.

Following her was a construction manager, and behind him was Mr. Bennet.

"This will *never* be ready in time," she lamented, looking around the parlor of her house unhappily, "and every second not spent looking for husbands is a second wasted."

"My dear, you must come and have your wardrobe replaced," implored Mr. Bennet. "You are *quite* in tatters and unsuited for being read, let alone receiving gentlemen--potential husbands or otherwise."

"He's quite right," urged the manager. "It is only a refit, nothing more; we will have you back on the shelf in a few days."

"On the shelf?" she shrieked. "Like my daughters?"

And she was about to burst into tears when she suddenly caught sight of me.

"You there! Do you have a single brother in possession of a good fortune who is in want of a wife?"

"I'm afraid not," I replied, thinking of Joffy, who failed on all three counts.

"Are you sure? I've a choice of five daughters; one of them *must* be suitable--although I have my doubts about Mary being acceptable to anyone. Ahhhhh!"

She had started to scream.

"Good lady, calm yourself!" cried Mr. Bennet. "What ever is the matter?"

"My nerves are so bad I am now seeing double!"

"You are *not*, madam," I told her hastily. "This is my...twin sister."

At that moment a small phalanx of seamstresses came in holding a replacement costume. Mrs. Bennet made another sharp cry and ran off upstairs, quickly followed by the wardrobe department, who would doubtless have to hold her down and undress her--like the last time.

"I'll leave it in your capable hands," said Mr. Bennet to the wardrobe mistress. "I am going to my library and don't wish to be disturbed."

He opened the door and found to his dismay that it, too, was being rebuilt. Large portions of the wall were missing, and plasterers were attempting to fill the gaps to the room beyond.



There was the flickering light of an arc welder and a shower of sparks. He harrumphed, shrugged, gave us a wan smile and walked out.

"Quite a lot of damage," I said to the construction manager, whose name we learned was Sid.

"We get a lot of this in the classics," he said with a shrug. "This is the third *P* refit I've done in the past fifteen years--but it's not as bad as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy; those things are *always* in for maintenance. The fantasy readership really gives it a hammering--and the fan fiction doesn't help neither."

"The name's Thursday Next," I told him, "from Jurisdiction. I need to speak to Isambard."

He led us outside to where the five Bennet sisters were running through their lines with a wordsmith holding a script.

"But you are not entitled to know mine; nor will such behavior ever induce me to be explicit," said Elizabeth.

"Not *quite* right," replied the wordsmith as she consulted the script. "You dropped the 'as this,' from the middle of the sentence."

"I did?" queried Lizzie, craning over to look at the script. "Where?"

"It still sounded *perfect* to me," said Jane good-naturedly.

"This is all just so *boring*," muttered Lydia, tapping her foot impatiently and looking around. Wisely, the maintenance staff had separated the soldiers and especially Wickham from Kitty and Lydia--for their own protection, if not the soldiers'.

"Lydia dearest, do *please* concentrate," said Mary, looking up from the book she was reading. "It is for your own good."

"Ms. Next!" came an authoritarian voice that I knew I could ignore only at my peril.

"Your ladyship," I said, curtsying neatly to a tall woman bedecked in dark crinolines. She had strongly marked features that might once have been handsome but now appeared haughty and superior.

"May I present Cadet Next?" I said. "Thursday5, this is the Right Honorable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh."

Thursday5 was about to say something, but I caught her eye and she curtsied instead, which Lady Catherine returned with

a slight incline of her head.

"I must speak to you, Ms. Next," continued her ladyship, taking my arm to walk with me, "upon a matter of considerable concern. As you know, I have a daughter named Anne, who is unfortunately of a sickly constitution, which has prevented her from making accomplishments she otherwise could not have failed. If good health had been hers, she would have joined Jurisfiction many years ago and about now would begin to accrue the benefits of her age, wisdom and experience."

"Doubtless, your ladyship."

Lady Catherine gave a polite smile. "Then we are agreed. Miss Anne should join Jurisfiction on the morrow with a rank, salary and duties commensurate with the standing that her ill health has taken from her--shall we say five thousand guineas a year and light work only with mornings off and three servants?"

"I will bring it to the attention of the relevant authorities," I told her diplomatically. "My good friend and colleague Commander Bradshaw will attend to your request personally."

I sniggered inwardly. Bradshaw and I had spent many years attempting to drop each other in impossible situations for amusement, and he'd never top this.

"Indeed," said Lady Catherine in an imperious tone. "I spoke to Commander Bradshaw, and he suggested I speak to *you*."

"Ah."

"Shall we say Monday?" continued Lady Catherine. "Jurisfiction can send a carriage for my daughter, but be warned--if it is unfit for her use, it shall be returned."

"Monday would be admirable," I told her, thinking quickly. "Miss Anne's assumed expertise will be much in demand. As you have no doubt heard, *Fanny Hill* has been moved from Literary Smut to the Racy Novel genre, and your daughter's considerable skills may be required for character retraining."

Lady Catherine was silent for a moment.

"Quite impossible," she said at last. "Next week is the busiest in our calendar. I shall inform you as to when and where she will accept her duties--good day!"

And with a harrumph of a most haughty nature, she was

gone.

I rejoined Thursday5, who was waiting for me near two carriages that were being rebuilt, and then we made our way toward the engineer's office. As we passed a moth-eaten horse, I heard it say to another shabby old nag, "So what's this *Pride and Prejudice* all about, then?"

"It's about a horse who pulls a carriage for the Bennets," replied his friend, taking a mouthful from the feed bucket and munching thoughtfully.

"Please come in," said the construction manager, and we entered the work hut. The interior was a neat and orderly drawing office with a half dozen octopi seated at draftsmen's desks and dressed in tartan waistcoats that made them all look like oversize bagpipes--apart from one, who actually was an oversize set of bagpipes. They were all studying plans of the book, consulting damage reports and then sketching repair recommendations on eight different note pads simultaneously. The octopi blinked at us curiously as we walked in, except for one who was asleep and muttering something about his "garden being in the shade," and another who was playing a doleful tune on a bouzouki.

"How odd," said Thursday5.

"You're right," I agreed. "Bruce usually plays the lute."

In the center of the room was Isambard Kingdom Bunuel. He was standing in shirtsleeves over the blueprints of the book and was a man in healthy middle age who looked as if he had seen a lot of life and was much the better for it. His dark wool suit was spattered with mud, he wore a tall stovepipe hat, and moving constantly in his mouth was an unlit cigar. He was engaged in animated conversation with his three trusty engineering assistants. The first could best be described as a mad monk who was dressed in a coarse habit and had startling, divergent eyes. The second was a daringly sparkly drag queen who it seemed had just hopped off a carnival float in Rio, and the third was more ethereal--he was simply a disembodied voice known only as Horace. They were all discussing the pros and cons of balancing essential work with budgetary constraints, then about Loretta's choice of sequins and the available restaurants for dinner.

"Thursday!" said Isambard as we walked in. "What a very fortuitous happenstance--I trust you are wellhealthy?"

"Wellhealthy indeedly," I replied.

Bunuel's engineering skills were without peer--not just from a simple mechanistic point of view but also from his somewhat surreal method of problem solving that made lesser book engineers pale into insignificance. It was he who first thought of using custard as a transfer medium for speedier throughput from the books to the Storycode Engines and he who pioneered the hydroponic growth of usable dramatic irony. When he wasn't working toward the decriminalization of class-C grammatical abuses, such as starting a sentence with "and," he was busy designing new and interesting plot devices. It was he who suggested the groundbreaking twist in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and also the "Gally Threepwood memoirs" device in the Blandings series. Naturally, he'd had other, lesser ideas that didn't find favor, such as the discarded U-boat-*Nautilus* battle sequence in *Mysterious Island*, a new process for distilling quotation marks from boiled mice, a method of making books grammasite-proof by marinating them in dew, and a whole host of farcical new words that only he used. But his hits were greater than the sum of his misses, and such is the way with greatness.

"I hope we are not in any sort of troublesome with Jurisfiction?"

"Not at all," I assured him. "You spoke to Bradshaw about something?"

"My memory is so stringbagness these days," he said, slapping his forehead with his palm. "Walk with me."

We left the work hut at a brisk pace and walked toward the empty book, Thursday5 a few steps behind.

"We've got another seventeen clockchimes before we have to click it all back onwise," he said, mopping his brow.

"Will you manage it?"

"We should be dokey," replied Isambard with a laugh. "Always supposing that Mrs. Bennet doesn't do anything sensible."

We walked up a set of wooden stairs and stepped onto the novel. From our vantage point, we could see the empty husk

of the book laid out in front of us. Everything had been removed, and it looked like an empty steel barge several hundred acres in size.

"What's happening over there?" asked Thursday5, pointing to a group of men working in an area where several girders joined in a delicate latticework of steel and rivets.

"We're checklooking for fatigue splitcracks near the irony-expansion slot," explained Isambard. "The ceaseless flexiblations of a book as readers of varying skill make their way through it can set up a harmonic that exacts stresstications the book was never blueprinted to take. I expect you heard about the mid-read fractsplosion of *Hard Times* during the postmaintenance testification in 1932?"

Thursday5 nodded.

"We've had to be more uttercarefulness since then," continued Isambard, "which is why classics like this come in for rebuildificance every thirty years whether they require it or not."

There was a crackle of bright blue light as the work gang effected a repair, and a subengineer supervising the gang waved to Isambard, who waved back.

"Looks like we found a fatigue crevicette," he said, "which goes to show that one can never be too carefulphobic."

"Commander Bradshaw told me you had something you wanted to say?"

"That's true," replied Bunuel. "I've done enough rebuildificances to know when something's a bit squiddly. It's the Council of Genres. They've been slicedicing bud gets for years, and now they ask us to topgrade the imaginotransference conduits."

He pointed at a large pipe that looked like a water main. A conduit that size would take a lot of readers--far more than we had at present. Although in itself a good move, with falling Read-Rates it seemed a little...well, *odd*.

"Did they give a reason?"

"They said *Pride and Prejudice* has been added to twenty-eight more teachcrammer syllabuses this year, and there's another silverflick out soon."

"Sounds fair to me."

"Posstruthful, but it makes nonsense. It's potentious *new* books we should be cashsquandering on, not the stalnovelwarts who will be read no matter what. Besides, the costcash of the extra conduits is verlittle compared to the amount of custard needed to fillup all."

"I'll make some inquiries," I told him.

We watched as the overhead crane gently lowered Darcy's stately home of Pemberley back into its position in the book, where it was then securely bolted by a group of men in overalls wielding wrenches as big as they were.

"Spot-on-time-tastic," murmured Isambard, consulting a large gold pocketwatch. "We might make the deadule after all."

"Mr. Bunuel?" murmured a disembodied voice that sounded as though it came from everywhere at once.

"Yes, Horace?"

"Sorry to trouble you, sir," came the voice again, "but Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine de Bourgh have locked antlers in the living room and are threatening to kill each other. What do you want to do?"

"No time to lose!" exclaimed Bunuel, reaching into his pocket. "I'll have five guineas on Mrs. Bennet."

Thursday5 and I walked out of the maintenance facility and back to the busy corridors of the Well of Lost Plots. I called TransGenre Taxis and was told that my cab was "stuck in a traffic jam in Mrs. Beeton's" but would "be with you shortly," so we walked toward the elevators. Bunuel had a point about the extra conduiting--but equally it could be just another of the bizarre accounting anomalies that abound at the council--they once refused to allocate funds for maintenance on *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, despite an almost unprecedented burst of popularity. By the time they agreed to some remedial construction work, it was too late--the first few chapters suffered permanent damage. On the other side of the coin, they had no problem issuing the Danvers with new black uniforms and designer dark glasses so they "looked nice on parade."

"Is it true you have a chair at the Council of Genres?" asked Thursday5 with a sense of wholly unwarranted awe in her

voice.

"And a table, too. As an Outlander I don't have the strictures of the narrative to dictate my actions, so I'm quite good at forward planning and--Hang on a moment."

Recalling Landen's writer's block, I ducked into a bric-a-brac store full of plot devices, props, backstories and handy snatches of verbal banter for that oh-so-important exchange. I made my way past packing cases full of plot twists and false resolutions and walked up to the counter.

"Hello, Murray."

"Thursday!" replied the owner of the store, a retired gag-and-groan man who had worked the Comedy genre for years before giving it all up to run a used-plot shop. "What can I do you for?"

"A plot device," I said somewhat vaguely. "Something exciting that will change a story from the mundane to the fantastic in a paragraph."

"Bud get?"

"Depends on what you've got."

"Hmm," said the shopkeeper, thinking hard and staring at the wall of small drawers behind him, which made it look a little like an apothecary's shop. On each drawer there was a painted label denoting some exciting and improbable plot-turning device. "Tincture of breathlessness," said one, and "Paternal root," read another.

"How about a *Suddenly a shot rang out*? That's always a safe bet for mysteries or to get you out of a scrape when you don't know what to do next."

"I think I can afford something better than that. Got anything a bit more...complex?"

Murray looked at the labels on the drawers again. "I've got a *And that, said Mr. Wimple, was when we discovered...the truth.*"

"Too vague."

"Perhaps, but it's cheap. Okay. How about a *Mysterious stranger arriving during a thunderstorm*? We've got a special on this week. Take the stranger and you can have a corrupt local chief of police and an escaped homicidal lunatic at no extra charge."

But I was still undecided.

"I was thinking of something more character-than plot-led."

"I hope you've got deep pockets," said the shop keeper ominously and with a trace of annoyance, as the line behind me was becoming longer by the second.

"How about the arrival of a distant and *extremely* eccentric ex-military uncle upsetting the delicate balance of the ordered household?"

"That sounds like just the thing. How much?"

"He was pulled out complete and unused a few days ago. Took a lot of skill to pluck him out of the narrative without damage, and with all ancillary props and walk-ons--"

"Yes, okay, okay, I get the picture--*How much?*"

"To you, a thousand guineas."

"I get the uncle fully realized for that, yes?"

"He's over there."

I turned to see a slender and very jovial-looking gentleman sitting on a packing case on the other side of the shop. He was dressed in a suit of outrageously loud green and yellow checks and was resting his gloves on the top of a cane. He inclined his head in greeting when he saw us looking at him and smiled impishly.

"Perfect. I get a full backstory as well, yes?"

"It's all here," said Murray, placing on the counter a glass jar that seemed to be full of swirling colored mist.

"Then it's a deal."

We shook hands, and I gave him my BookWorld ChargeCard. I was just standing there in that blank sort of way you do while waiting for a shopkeeper to complete a transaction, when the hair on the back of my neck suddenly rose. It was a sixth sense, if you like--something you acquire in the BookWorld, where jeopardy is sometimes never more than a line away. I surreptitiously slipped my hand into my bag and clasped the butt of my pistol. I looked cautiously from the corner of my eye at the customer to my left. It was a freelance imaginator buying powdered kabuki--no problem there. I looked to the right and perceived a tall figure dressed in a trench coat with a fedora pulled down to hide his face. I tensed as the faint odor of bovine reached my nostrils. It was the Minotaur, the half-man, half-bull son of Queen Pasiphae of



Crete. He'd killed one Jurisdiction agent and tried the same with me several times, so consequently he had an "erase on sight" order across sixteen genres--there were few these days who would dare harbor him. I stayed calm and turned toward Thursday5, who was looking at a pair of toucans that were a job lot from a scrapped bird-identification handbook. I caught her eye and showed her three fingers, which was a prearranged signal of imminent danger, then gave an almost imperceptible nod in the Minotaur's direction. Thursday5 looked bewildered, I gave up and turned slowly back.

"Soon be done!" muttered Murray, filling out the credit form. I stole a look toward the Minotaur again. I could have erased him there and then, but it was always possible that this wasn't the Minotaur we were hunting. After all, there were thousands of Minotaurs dotted around the BookWorld, and they all looked pretty much alike. Admittedly, not many wore trench coats and fedoras, but I wasn't going to dispatch anyone without being sure.

"Would you like that frying pan wrapped, Mr. Johnson?" asked the lady serving the Minotaur. I required nothing more. He'd been using the "Mr. Johnson" pseudonym for many years--and the frying pan? Well, we'd darted him once with SlapStick as a tracking device, and it seemed to have crept into his *modus operandi* of assassination. Steamrollers, banana skins, falling pianos--he'd used them all. In the pantheon of SlapStick, the close-quarters hand weapon of choice was...a frying pan. Without waiting another second, I drew my pistol. The Minotaur, with a speed out of all proportion to his bulk, flipped the frying pan to his other hand and swiped it in my direction, catching the pistol and sending it clattering to the other side of the room. We paused and stared at each other. The frying pan had a two-foot handle, and he brandished it at me in a threatening manner. He removed his hat, and as the other customers realized who he was, there was a cry of fear and a mass exodus from the shop. He had the body of a man but the head of a bull, which had a kind of *humanness* about it that was truly disturbing. His yellow eyes gleamed at me with malevolence, and his horns, I noticed, had been sharpened to wickedly fine points.

"We can talk about this," I said in a quiet tone, wondering if Thursday5 had the wits to try to distract him.

"No talk," said the Minotaur in a basso profundo. "My job is to kill you, and yours...is to *die*."

I tried to stall him. "Let's talk for a minute about job descriptions."

But the Minotaur wasn't in the talking vein. He took a pace forward and made another swipe at me with the frying pan. I took a step backward but even so felt the breeze of the pan as it just missed my head. I grabbed the object nearest to hand, which was a golf club, and tried to hit him with it, but he was faster, and the wooden shaft of the club was reduced to splinters and sawdust with the ferocity of his blow. He gave out another deep, hearty laugh and took a further step toward me.

"I say," came a voice that sounded like crumpets and tea at four o'clock sharp. "You, sir--with the horns."

The Minotaur looked to where the voice had come from but still kept me within his vision. The interloper, of course, was the eccentric relative I'd just purchased for Landen's book. He had left his packing case and stood facing the beast armed with nothing more than his walking stick.

"Now, run along, there's a good chap," he said, as though he were talking to a child.

The Minotaur curled a lip and breathed a threatening, "*Begone!*"

"Look here," replied the character in the green and yellow checks. "I'm not sure I care for the tone of your voice."

The Minotaur was suddenly a whirling mass of demonic destruction. He swung the frying pan toward the gentleman in an arc that could never have missed. But he *did* miss. There was a flash of silver, a blur of green and yellow, and the frying pan clattered to the floor--with the Minotaur's hand still clutching it. The Minotaur looked at the frying pan, at the severed hand, then at his stump. He grimaced, gave out a deafening yell that shattered the windows of the shop and then evaporated into nothing as he jumped off and away.

"By gad, what a to-do," exclaimed the gentleman as he calmly cleaned his sword-stick and returned it to his sheath.

"Anyone know who he was?"

"The Minotaur."

"Was he, by George?" exclaimed the gentleman in surprise. "Would have expected a better fight than that. Are you quite well?"

"Yes," I answered, "thanks to you. That was a nifty piece of sword-work."

"My dear girl, think nothing of it," he replied with the ghost of a smile. "I was captain of the fencing team at Rugby."

He was a handsome man in his mid-forties, and everything he did and said was liberally iced with a heavy coating of stiff British reserve. I couldn't imagine what book he had come from or even why he'd been offered up as salvage.

"Thursday Next," I said, putting out my hand.

"The plea sure is all mine, Ms. Next," he replied. "Wing Commander Cornelius Scampton-Tappett at your ser vice."

The customers were slowly coming back to peer into the store, but Murray was already placing Closed signs on the doors.

"So," said Scampton-Tappett, "now that you've bought me, what would you have me do?"

"Oh...yes...right."

I dug a calling card from my pocket, wrote down the title of Landen's latest novel--*Bananas for Edward*--and handed it to him.

"Do what you can, would you? And if you need anything, you can contact me over at Jurisfiction."

Scampton-Tappett raised an eyebrow, told me he would do the very best he could, tucked the jar containing his backstory under his arm and vanished.

I breathed a sigh of relief and glanced around. Thursday5 was regarding me with such a sense of abject loss and failure on her face that I thought at first she'd been hurt.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded and looked down. I followed her gaze. Lying at her feet was my pistol.

"Is that where it ended up after it was knocked from my grasp?"

She nodded miserably, her eyes brimming with tears of self-

anger.

I sighed. She and I both knew that this was the end of the road when it came to her cadetship. If Scampton-Tappett hadn't intervened, I might well be dead--and she'd done nothing to prevent it.

"You don't have to say it," she said. "I'm manifestly not cut out for this work and never shall be. I'd try to apologize, but I can't think of words that could adequately express my shame."

She took a deep breath, pulled the bow out of her hair, put it in her mouth and then gathered up her hair in a ponytail again before retying it. It was just the way I did it, and I suddenly felt a pang of guilt. After all, she only acted in her morbidly peaceable way because that's how she was *written*, as an antidote to the rest of the Thursday series. The thing was, the sex-and-violence nature of the first four books had been my fault, too. I'd sold the character rights in order to fund Acme Carpets.

"I'd best be getting back to my book now," she said, and turned to go.

"Did I say you could leave?" I asked in my stoniest voice.

"Well, that is to say...no."

"Then until I say you can go, you stay with me. I'm still undecided as to your fate, and until that happens--Lord help me--you'll stay as my cadet."

We returned to Jurisfiction, and Thursday5 went and did some Pilates in the corner, much to the consternation of Mrs. Dashwood, who happened to be passing. I reported the Minotaur's appearance and the state of the Austen refit to Bradshaw, who told me to have the Minotaur's details and current whereabouts texted to all agents.

After returning to my desk, dealing with some paperwork and being consulted on a number of matters, I drew out Thursday5's assessment form, filled it in and then checked the "Failed" box on the last page before I signed it. I folded it twice, slid it into the envelope and wavered for a moment before eventually placing it in the top drawer of my desk.

I looked at my watch. It was time to go home. I walked over to Thursday5, who had her eyes closed and was standing on one leg. "Same time tomorrow?"

She opened her eyes and stared into mine. I got the same feeling when staring into the mirror at home. The touchy-feely New Age stuff was all immaterial. She was me, but me as I *might* have been if I'd never joined the police, army, SpecOps or Jurisdiction. Perhaps I wouldn't have been any happier if I'd connected with the side of me that was her, but I'd be a lot more relaxed and a good deal healthier.

"Do you mean it?" she asked.

"Wouldn't say it if I didn't. But remember one thing: It's coffee and a bacon roll."

She smiled. "Right. Coffee and bacon roll it is." She handed me a paper bag. "This is for you."

I peered inside. It contained Pickwick's blue-and-white knitted cozy--finished.

"Good job," I murmured, looking at the delicate knitting enviously. "Thank--"

But she'd gone. I walked to the corridor outside and dug out my TravelBook, turned to the description of my office at Acme Carpets and read. After a few lines, the air turned suddenly colder, there was the sound of crackling cellophane, and I was back in my small office with a dry mouth and a thirst so strong I thought I would faint. I kept a pitcher of water close by for just these moments, and thus I spent the next ten minutes drinking water and breathing deeply.

## 12.

### Kids

Landen and I had often talked about it, but we never had a fourth. When Jenny came along, I was forty-two, and that, I figured, was it. On the occasion of our last attempt to induct Friday into the ChronoGuard's Academy of Time, he was the eldest at sixteen, Tuesday was twelve, and Jenny, the youngest, was ten. I resisted naming Jenny after a day of the week; I thought at least one of us should have the semblance of normality.

I arrived at Tuesday's school at ten to four and waited patiently outside the math room. She'd shown a peculiar flair for the subject all her life but had first achieved prominence when aged nine. She'd wandered into the sixth-form math room and found an equation written on the board, thinking it was homework. But it wasn't. It was Fermat's Last Theorem, and the math master had written it down to demonstrate how this simple equation could not be solved. The thing was, Tuesday had *found a solution*, thus rendering a proof of the unworkability of the equation both redundant and erroneous.

When the hunt was on for the person who had solved it, Tuesday thought they were angry with her for spoiling their fun, so she wasn't revealed as the culprit for almost a week. Even then she had to be cajoled into explaining the answer. Professors of mathematics had tubed in from every corner of the globe to see how such a simple solution could have been staring them in the face without any of them noticing it.

At four on the button, Tuesday came out of the math class looking drained and a bit cross.

"Hi, sweetheart," I said. "How was school?"

"S'okay," she said with a shrug, handing me her Hello Kitty school bag, pink raincoat and half-empty Winnie-the-Pooh lunch box. "Do you have to pick me up in your Acme uniform? It's, like, soooooo embarrassing."

"I certainly do," I replied, giving her a big smoochy kiss to embarrass her further, something that didn't really work, as the pupils in her math class were all grown up and too obsessed with number sets and parameterized elliptic curves to be bothered by a daughter's embarrassment over her mother.

"They're all a bit *slow*," she said as we walked to the van. "Some of them can barely count."

"Sweetheart, they are the finest minds in mathematics today; you should be happy that they're coming to you for tutoring. It must have been a bit of a shock to the mathematics fraternity when you revealed that there were sixteen more odd numbers than even ones."

"Seventeen," she corrected me. "I thought of another one on the bus this morning. The odd-even disparity is the easy bit," she explained. "The hard part is trying to explain that there actually *is* a highest number, a fact that tends to throw all work regarding infinite sets into a flat spin."

Clearly, the seriously smart genes that Mycroft had inherited from *his* father had bypassed my mother and me but appeared in Tuesday. It was odd to think that Mycroft's two sons were known collectively as "the Stupids"--and it wasn't an ironic title either.

Tuesday groaned again when she saw we were driving home in the Acme Carpets van but agreed to get in when I pointed out that a long walk home was the only alternative. She scrunched down in her seat so as not to be spotted.

We didn't go straight home. I'd spoken to Spike before leaving work, and he mentioned that he had some news about Mycroft's haunting and agreed to meet me at Mum's. When I arrived, she and Polly were in the kitchen bickering about something pointless, such as the average size of an orange, so I left Tuesday with them: Mother to burn her a cake and Polly to discuss advanced Nextian Geometry.

"Hiya," I said to Spike, who'd been waiting in his car.

"Yo. Thought about what to do with Felix8?"

"Not yet. I'll interview him again later this evening."

"As you wish. I made a few inquiries on the other side. Remember my dead partner, Chesney? He said Mycroft's

spooking was what we call a Nonrecurring Informative Phantasm."

"You have them categorized?"

"Sure. The A-list contains Pointless Screamer, Crisis Warner, Murder Avenger and Recurrent Dreary. From there it's all downhill: poltergeists, faceless orbs, quasi-religious visions and phantom smells--more usually associated with recently departed pet Labradors."

We walked up the garden path to Mycroft's workshop.

"I get the picture. So what does it all mean?" I asked.

"It means that Mycroft had something he wanted to say before he died--but didn't manage to. It was obviously important enough for him to be given a license to come back, if only for a few hours. Turn off your cell phone."

I reached into my pocket and did as he asked.

"Radio waves scramble their energy field," he explained. "Spooking's dropped big-time since the cell-phone network kicked in. I'm amazed there are any ghosts left at all. Ready?"

"Ready."

We had arrived at my uncle's workshop, and Spike grasped the handle and gently pushed the door open. If we were hoping to find Mycroft standing there in all his spectral glory, we were disappointed. The room was empty.

"He was just over there."

Spike closed his eyes, sniffed the air and touched the workbench. "Yeah," he said, "I can feel him."

"Can you?"

"No, not really. Where was he again?"

"At the worktop. Spike, what exactly *is* a ghost?"

"A phantom," said my uncle Mycroft, who had just materialized, "is essentially a heteromorphic wave pattern that gains solidity when the apparition converts thermal energy from the surroundings to visible light. It's a fascinating process, and I'm amazed no one has thought of harnessing it--a holographic TV that could operate from the heat given off by an average-size guinea pig."

I shivered. Mycroft was right--the temperature *had* dropped--and there he was, but a lot less solid than the previous time. I could easily see the other side of the workshop through him.



"Hello again, Thursday," he said. "Good afternoon, Mr. Stoker."

"Good afternoon, sir," replied Spike. "Word in the Realm of the Dead says you've got something to tell us."

"I have?" asked Mycroft, looking at me.

"Yes, Uncle," I told him, "You're a Nonrecurring...um--"

"Nonrecurring Informative Phantasm," put in Spike helpfully. "An NIP, or what we call in the trade Speak Up and Shut Down."

"It means, Uncle," I said, "that you've got something *really* important to tell us."

Mycroft looked thoughtful for so long that I almost nudged him before I realized it would be useless.

"Like what?" he said at last.

"I don't know. Perhaps a...philosophy of life or something?"

Mycroft looked at me doubtfully and raised an eyebrow. "The only thing that springs to mind is, 'You can never have too many chairs.'"

"That's it? You returned from the dead to give me advice on furniture distribution?"

"I know it's not much of a philosophy," said Mycroft with a shrug, "but it can pay dividends if someone unexpectedly pops around for dinner."

"Uncle, *please* try to remember what it is you have to tell us!"

"Was I murdered or anything?" he asked in a dreamy fashion. "Ghosts often come back if they've been killed or something--at least, Patrick Swayze did."

"You definitely weren't murdered," I told him. "It was a long illness."

"Then this *is* something of a puzzle," murmured Mycroft, "but I suppose I've got the greater part of eternity to figure it out."

That's what I liked about my uncle--always optimistic. But that was it. In another moment he had gone.

"Thirty-three seconds," said Spike, who had put a stopwatch on him, "and about fifty-five percent opacity." He flicked through a small book of tables he had with him. "Hmm," he said at last, "almost certainly a trivisitation. You've got him

one more time. He'll be down at fifteen to twenty percent opacity and will only be around for about fifteen seconds."

"Then I could miss him?"

"No," said Spike with a smile, "he appeared to you twice out of twice. The final appearance will be to you, too. Just have a proper question ready for him when you next come here--Mycroft's memory being what it is, you can't rely on him remembering what he came back for. It's up to you."

"Thanks, Spike," I said as I closed the door of the workshop. "I owe you."

Tuesday and I were home in a few minutes. The house felt warm and comfy, and there was the smell of cooking that embraced me like an old friend.

"Hi, darling!" I called out. Landen stopped his typing and came out of the office to give me a hug.

"How was work?" he asked.

I thought of what I'd been doing that day. Of firing and not firing my drippy alter ego, of a Superreader loose somewhere in the BookWorld, of Goliath's unwelcome intrusion and of Mycroft as a ghost. Then there was the return of Felix8, the Minotaur, and my bag of Welsh cash. The time for truth was now. I *had* to tell him.

"I...I had to do a stair carpet over in Baydon. Hell on earth; the treads were all squiffy, none of the stair rods would fit, and Spike and I spent the whole afternoon on it--how's the book going?"

He kissed me on the forehead and tousled Tuesday's hair affectionately, then took me by the hand and led me into the kitchen, where there was a stew on the stove.

"Kind of okay, I guess," he replied, stirring the dinner, "but nothing really spectacular."

"No ideas?" I prompted. "An odd *character*, perhaps?"

"No--I was mostly working on pace and atmosphere."

This was strange. I'd specifically told Scampton-Tappett to do his best. I had a sudden thought.

"What book are you working on, sweetheart?"

"*The Mews of Doom*."

Aha.

"I thought you said you'd be rewriting *Bananas for Edward*?"

"I got bored with it. Why do you ask?"

"No reason. Where's Friday?"

"In his room. I made him have a shower, so he's in a bit of a snot."

"Plock."

"A clean snot is better than a dirty snot I suppose. And Jenny?"

"Watching TV."

I called out, "Hey, Jenny!" but there was no answer.

"Plock."

"She's upstairs in her room."

I looked at the hall clock. We still had a half hour until we had to go to the ChronoGuard's career-advisory pre sen ta tion.

"PLOCK!"

"Yes, yes, hello, Pickwick--how's this?"

I showed her the finished blue-and-white sweater, and before she could even think of complaining, I had slipped it over her featherless body. Landen and I stared at her this way and that, trying to figure out if it was for the better or the worse.

"It makes her look like something out of the Cornish Blue pottery cata log," said Landen at last.

"Or a very large licorice allsort," I added.

Pickwick glared at us sullenly, then realized she was a good deal warmer and hopped off the kitchen table and trotted down the corridor to try to look in the mirror, which was unfortunately just too high, so she spent the next half hour jumping up and down trying to catch a glimpse of herself.

"Hi, Mum," said Friday, looking vaguely presentable as he walked down the stairs.

"Hello, Sweetpea," I said, passing him the CD Polly had given me. "I got this for you. It's an early release of *Hosing the Dolly*. Check out the guitar riff on the second track."

"Cool," replied Friday, visibly impressed in a "nothing impresses me" sort of way. "How did you get hold of it?"

"Oh, you know," I said offhandedly. "I have friends in the recording industry. I wasn't always just a boring mum, you know."

"Polly gave it to you, didn't she?"

I sighed. "Yes. Ready to go?"

Landen joined us, and he and I moved toward the door. Friday stood where he was.

"Do I have to?"

"You promised. And there isn't another ChronoGuard career-advisory meeting in Swindon for another six months."

"I don't want to work in the time industry."

"Listen," I said, my voice rising as I finally lost patience, "get your lazy butt out the door--okay?"

He knew better than to argue with angry-determined Mum. Landen knocked on the partition wall, and a minute later our neighbor Mrs. Berko-Boyer was on the doorstep wearing a pink quilted dressing gown, her hair in curlers.

"Good evening, Mrs. Berko-Boyer," I said.

"Is it?" she said with a snarl. "Is it *really*?"

"We'll be about an hour," explained Landen, who was more skilled at dealing with our volatile yet oddly helpful neighbor.

"Do you know the last time Mr. Berko-Boyer took me out anywhere?" she asked, scowling at all three of us.

"I've no idea."

"Saturday."

"Well, that's not *that* long ago--"

"Saturday, October the sixth, 1983," she said with a contemptuous sniff, and shuffled past us into the living room.

"Nineteen years ago. Makes me sick, I tell you. Hello, Tuesday," she said in a kindlier tone. "Where's your sister?"

We walked down to the tram stop in silence. Friday's lack of interest in the ChronoGuard was a matter not only of annoyance but *surprise*. The Standard History Eventline had him joining the industry three years ago on their Junior Time Scout program, something that he had failed to do despite our efforts and those of the ChronoGuard, which was as concerned as we were. But we couldn't force him either--time was the glue of the cosmos and had to be *eased* apart--push destiny too hard and it had an annoying habit of pushing back. He had to join the ChronoGuard, but it had to be his decision. Every way you looked at it, time was out of joint.

## The ChronoGuard

SpecOps-12 is the ChronoGuard, the governmental department dealing with Temporal Stability. Its job is to maintain the integrity of the Standard History Eventline (SHE) and police the time stream against any unauthorized changes or usage. Its most brilliant work is never noticed, as changes in the past always seem to have been that way. Planet-destroying cataclysms generally happen twice a week but are carefully rerouted by skilled ChronoGuard operatives. The citizenry never notices a thing--which is just as well, really.

The ChronoGuard had its regional offices in the old SpecOps building where I had worked at SO-27, the Literary Detectives. It was a large, no-nonsense Germanic design that had certainly seen better days. Landen and I walked into what had once been the main debriefing room, Friday shuffling in behind us, hands thrust deeply in his pockets and head nodding to the beat of his Walkman. Of course, this being the ChronoGuard, they already had a list of attendees from the forms we'd filled out at the end of the evening, which seemed to work quite well until a couple with a spotty kid in front of us found they weren't on the list.

"Oh, dear," said the woman at the registration desk in an apologetic tone. "But it seems that you don't stay until the end of the presentation, so we've been unable to include you in the registration process. You're going to have to come to the next careers presentation in six months' time."

The father of the group scratched his head for a moment, stopped to say something, thought better of it and then departed, arguing with his wife.

"Mr. and Mrs. Parke-Laine-Next and their son, Friday," I said to the woman, who blinked for a few seconds, looked at Friday, gave a shy smile and then started to chatter and gush in a most unseemly manner.

"Mr. Next--Friday--how do you do? I've wanted to meet you again for the first time. May I shake you by the hand and congratulate you on--"

She stopped, realized she was being a bit previous and making a fool of herself, so coughed in an embarrassed manner before smoothing her skirt absently and sitting down again.

"Sorry. Welcome to the pre sen ta tion. Here are your badges and your information pack. If you would like to go in, Captain Scintilla will join you soon."

We dutifully took our seats, and Friday slouched in a very obvious don't-give-a-monkey's manner until I told him to sit up straight, which he didn't like but sat up nonetheless.

"What are we doing here?" he asked in a bored voice. "And why the time industry? What about plumbing or something?"

"Because your grandfather was a time operative."

"Yeah," he grunted, "and look what happened to him."

Landen and I exchanged glances. Friday was right. Ending up not having existed wasn't a terrific end to a promising career.

"Well!" said a youthful-looking man in the pale blue uniform of the ChronoGuard who up until now had been helping escort the previous group out of the room. "My name is Captain Bendix Scintilla, and I am head of ChronoGuard Recruitment. I'd like to welcome all of you to this ChronoGuard careers pre sen ta tion and hope that this short talk might go some way toward explaining what it is that we done. Did. *Do*. Anyway, my aims are twofold: secondly, to try to demonstrate to the young people here that a career in the time industry is a very exciting prospect indeed and, firstly, to lift the lid on the Temporal Trade and explode a few common myths and misunderstandings. As I'm about to say, did say or would say, my name is Bendix Scintilla, and I was died on March sixteenth, 3291. I'm twenty-three years old in my own personal time, seven hundred and twenty-six in my elapsed work time, and you meet me twenty-seven percent through my life."

He smiled, unaware that he was making very little sense. I was used to it, but by the manner in which the rest of the

audience members were scratching their heads and looking at one another, they weren't. Bendix picked up a solid bar of yellow plastic that was about three feet long, two inches wide and domed at either end.

"Does anyone know what this is?" he asked. There was silence, so he passed it to the nearest family and told them to pass it on. "Anyone who can guess wins a prize."

The first family shrugged and passed it to us. Friday gave it the most cursory of glances, and I passed it on.

"Yes, sir?" asked Bendix, pointing to a man in the front row who was with his painfully thin wife and a pair of geeky-looking twins.

"Me?" said the man in a confused voice.

"Yes. I understand you have a question? Sorry, I should have explained. To save time I thought I'd ask you *before* you actually raised your hand."

"Oh!" said the man, and then he shrugged and said, "I was wondering, since we were told this was the only open day for six months, just who the previous group filing out of the door was--and why were they looking at us in that extremely inquisitive manner?"

"Why, that was *you* good people, of course! In order not to keep you from your busy schedules, this meeting actually takes no time at all. The moment you arrived was precisely the time you left, only out the other entrance so you wouldn't meet yourselves."

As soon as he said it, a twitter of understanding and wonderment went through the small group. I'd experienced the ChronoGuard in the past, so these sorts of cheap parlor tricks didn't impress me, but for many of the people present, to whom time was immutable, it was something new and exciting. Scintilla had been doing this show for many years and knew how to get an audience's attention.

"Time is odd," said Bendix, "*very* odd. It's odder than almost anything you can think of. What you *consider* the usual march of time--effect rather quaintly following cause and so forth--is actually a useful illusion, impressed upon you by rules of physics so *very* benign that we consider them devised by Something Awfully Friendly indeed; if it weren't for time,

everything would happen at the same instant and existence would become tiresomely frenetic and be over very quickly. But before we get into all that, let's have a show of hands to see who is actually considering a career in time?"

Quite a few hands went up, but Friday's was not among them. I noticed Scintilla staring in our direction as he asked, and he seemed put out by Friday's intransigence.

"Yes, miss, you have a question?"

He pointed to a young girl sitting in the back row with her expensive-looking parents.

"How did you know I was going to ask a question?"

"That was your question, wasn't it?"

"Um...yes."

"Because you've already asked it."

"I haven't."

"Actually, you *have*. Everything that makes up what you call the present is in reality the long distant past. The *actual* present is in what you regard as the far-distant future. All of this happened a long time ago and is recorded in the Standard History Eventline, so we know what will happen and can see when things happen that weren't *meant* to. You and I and everything in this room are actually ancient history--but if that seems a bit depressing, let me assure you that these really *are* the good old days. Yes, madam?"

A woman just next to us hadn't put up her hand, of course, but was clearly thinking of it.

"So how is it possible to move through time?"

"The force that pushes the fabric of time along is the past attempting to catch up with the future in order to reach an equilibrium. Think of it as a wave--and where the past starts to break over the future in front of it, that's the present. At that moment of temporal instability is a vortex--a *tube*, in surfing parlance--that runs perpendicular to the arrow of time but leads to everything that has ever happened or ever will happen. Of course, that's greatly simplified, but with skill, training, a really good uniform and a bit of aptitude, you'll learn to ride the tube as it ripples through the fabric of space-time. Yes, sir?"

A young lad in the front row was the next to ask a question.



"How can you surf a time wave that is squillions of years in the future?"

"Because it isn't. It's everywhere, all at once. Time is like a river, with the source, body and mouth all existing at the same time."

Friday turned to me and said in a very unsubtle whisper, "Is this going to take long?"

"Keep quiet and pay attention."

He looked heavenward, sighed audibly and slouched deeper in his chair.

Scintilla carried on, "The time industry is an equal-opportunity employer, has its own union of Federated Timeworkers and a pay structure with overtime payments and bonuses. The working week is forty hours, but each hour is only fifty-two minutes long. Time-related holidays are a perk of the service and can be undertaken after the first ten years' employment. And also, to make it *really* attractive, we will give each new recruit a Walkman and vouchers to buy ten CDs of your--"

He stopped talking, because Friday had put up his hand. We noticed that the other members of the ChronoGuard were staring in dumb wonderment at Friday. The reason wasn't altogether clear until it suddenly struck me: *Scintilla hadn't known that Friday was going to ask a question.*

"You...have a question?"

"I do. The question is, 'Tell me the question I'm going to ask.'"

Scintilla gave a nervous laugh and looked around the audience in an uncomfortable manner. Eventually he hazarded a guess:

"You...want to know where the toilet is?"

"No. I wanted to know if everything we do is preordained."

Scintilla gave out another shrill, nervous laugh. Friday was a natural, and they all knew it. The thing was, I think Friday did, too--but didn't care.

"A good point and, as you just demonstrated, not at all. Your question was what we call a 'free radical,' an anomalous event that exists independent of the Standard History Eventline, or SHE. Generally, SHE is the one that must be obeyed, but time

also has an annoying propensity for random flexibility. Like rivers, time starts and finishes in generally the same place. Certain events--like gorges and rapids--tend to stay the same. However, on the flat temporal plain, the timestream can meander quite considerably, and when it moves toward danger, it's up to us to change something in the event-past to swing the timestream back on course. It's like navigation on the open seas, really, only the ship stays still and you navigate the storm."

He smiled again. "But I'm getting ahead of myself. Apocalypse avoidance is only one area of our expertise. Patches of bad time that open spontaneously need to be stitched closed, ChronoTheft is very big in the seventh millennium, and the total eradication of the Dark Ages by a timephoon is requiring a considerable amount of effort to repair, and--"

He stopped talking, because Friday had inexplicably raised his hand once again.

"Why don't you tell us about the downside?" asked Friday in a sullen voice from beneath a curtain of hair. "About time aggregations and leaks in the gravity suits that leave cadets a molecule thick?"

"That's why we're here," explained Scintilla, attempting to make light of the situation, "to clear up any small matters of misrepresentation that you might have heard. I won't try to convince you that accidents haven't happened, but like all industries we take health and safety very seriously."

"Son," I said, laying a hand on his arm, "hear what he has to say first."

Friday turned and parted his long hair so I could see his eyes. They were intelligent, bright--and *scared*.

"Mum, you told me about the accidents--about Dad's eradication and Filbert Snood. Why do you want me to work for an industry that seems to leave its workers dead, non ex is tent or old before their time?"

He got up and made for the exit, and we followed him as Scintilla attempted to carry on his talk, although firmly rattled. But as we tried to leave, a ChronoGuard operative stood in our way.

"I think you should stay and listen to the pre sen ta tion," he said, addressing Friday, who told him to get stuffed. The Chrono took exception to this and made a grab for him, but I was quicker and caught the guard's wrist, pulled him around and had him on the floor with his arm behind his back.

"*Muumm!*" whined Friday, more embarrassed than outraged. "Do you have to? People are *watching!*"

"Sorry," I said, letting go of the guard. Scintilla had excused himself from his talk and came over to see what was going on.

"If we want to leave, we leave," growled Landen.

"Of course!" agreed Scintilla, motioning with a flick of his head for the Chrono to move off. "You can go whenever you want." He looked at me; he knew how important it was to get Friday inducted, and knew I knew it, too.

"But before you go," he said, "Friday, I want you to know that we would be very happy to have you join the time industry. No minimum academic qualifications, no entrance exam. It's an unconditional offer--the first we've ever made."

"And what makes you think I'd be any good at it?"

"You can ask questions that aren't already lodged in the SHE. Do you think just *anyone* can do that?"

He shrugged. "I'm not interested."

"I'm just asking for you to stay and hear what we have to say."

"I'm...not...interested," replied Friday more forcefully.

"Listen," said Scintilla, after looking around furtively and lowering his voice, "this is a bit unofficial, but I've had a word with Wayne Skunk, and he's agreed to let you play a guitar riff on the second track of *Hosing the Dolly*."

"It's too late," said Friday, "it's already been recorded."

Bendix stared at him. "Yes--and by *you*."

"I never did anything of the sort!"

"No, but you *might*. And since *that* possibility exists, you did. Whether you *actually* do is up to you, but either way you can have that one on us. It's your solo in any case. Your name is already in the liner notes."

Friday looked at Scintilla, then at me. I knew how much he loved Strontium Goat, and Scintilla knew, too. He had Friday's complete ser vice record, after all. But Friday wasn't

interested. He didn't like being pushed, cajoled, bullied or bribed. I couldn't blame him--I hated it, too, and he was my son, after all.

"You think you can *buy* me?" he said finally, and left without another word.

"I'll catch up," I said as he walked out with Landen.

While the swinging doors shut noisily behind them, Scintilla said to me, "Do I need to emphasize how important it is that Friday joins the ChronoGuard as soon as possible? He should have signed up three years ago and be surfing the timestream by now."

"You may have to wait a little longer, Bendix."

"That's just it," he replied. "We don't have much time."

"I thought you had all the time there was."

He took me by the arm, and we moved to a corner of the room.

"Thursday--can I call you Thursday?--we're facing a serious crisis in the time industry, and as far as we know, Friday's leadership several trillion bang/crunch cycles from now is the only thing that we can depend on--his truculence at this end of time means his desk is empty at the other."

"But there's *always* a crisis in time, Bendix."

"Not like this. This isn't a crisis *in* time--it's a crisis *of* time. We've been pushing the frontiers of time forward for trillions upon trillions of years, and in a little over four days we'll have reached the...End of Time."

"And that's bad, right?"

Bendix laughed. "Of course not! Time has to end *somewhere*. But there's a problem with the very mechanism that controls the way we've been scooting around the here and now for most of eternity."

"And that is?"

He looked left and right and lowered his voice. "*Time travel has yet to be invented!* And with the entire multiverse one giant hot ball of superheated gas contracting at incalculable speed into a point one trillion-trillionth the size of a neutron, it's not likely to be."

"Wait, wait," I said, trying to get this latest piece of information into my head. "I know that the whole time travel

thing makes very little logical sense, but you must have machines that enable you to move through time, right?"

"Of course--but we've got no idea how they work, who built them or when. We've been running the entire industry on something we call 'retro-deficit-engineering.' We use the technology *now*, safe in the assumption that it will be invented in the *future*. We did the same with the Gravitube in the fifties and the microchip ten years ago--neither of them actually gets invented for over ten thousand years, but it helps us more to have them *now*."

"Let me get this straight," I said slowly. "You're using technology you don't have--like me overspending on my credit card."

"Right. And we've searched every single moment in case it *was* invented and we hadn't noticed. Nothing. Zip. Nada. *Rien*."

His shoulders slumped, and he ran his fingers through his hair.

"Listen, if Friday doesn't retake his seat at the head of the ChronoGuard and use his astonishing skills to somehow save us, then everything that we've worked toward will be undone as soon as we hit Time Zero."

"I think I get it. Then why is Friday not following his destined career?"

"I've no idea. We always had him down as dynamic and aggressively inquisitive when he was a child--what happened?"

I shrugged. "All kids are like that today. It's a modern thing, caused by too much TV, video games and other instant-gratification bullshit. Either that--or kids are *exactly* the same and I'm getting crusty and intolerant in my old age. Listen, I'll do what I can."

Scintilla thanked me, and I joined Friday and Landen outside.

"I don't want to work in the time industry, Mum. I'd only break some dumb rule and end up eradicated."

"My eradication was pretty painless," reflected Landen. "In fact, if your mother hadn't told me about it, I never would have known it happened."

"That doesn't help, Dad," grumbled Friday. "You were reactualized--what about Granddad? No one can say whether

he exists or not--not even him."

I rested my hand on his shoulder. He didn't pull away this time.

"I know, Sweetpea. And if you don't want to join, no one's going to make you."

He was quiet for a while, then said, "Do you *have* to call me Sweetpea? I'm sixteen."

Landen and I looked at each other, and then we took the tram back home. True to his word, Bendix had slipped us back a few minutes to just before we went in, and as we rattled home in silence, we passed ourselves arriving.

"You know that yellow rod Bendix showed us?" said Friday, staring out the window.

"Yes?"

"It was a half second of snooker ball."

## Home Again

Noting with dismay that most cross-religion bickering occurred only because all the major religions were convinced they were the *right* one and every other religion was the *wrong* one, the founders of the Global Standard Deity based their fledgling "portmanteau" faith on the premise that most religions want the same thing once all the shameless, manipulative power play had been subtracted: peace, stability, equality and justice--the same as the nonfaiths. As soon as they found that centralizing thread that unites all people and made a dialogue of sorts with a Being of Supreme Moral Authority mostly optional, the GSD flourished.

Friday went to his room in a huff as soon as we got in. Mrs. Berko-Boyer told us that the girls were fine and that she had folded all the washing, cleaned the kitchen, fed Pickwick and made us all cottage pie. This wasn't unusual for her, and she scoffed at any sort of payment, then shuffled off home, muttering darkly about how if she'd killed her husband when she'd first thought of it, she'd be "out of prison by now."

"Where's Jenny?" I asked Landen, having just gone upstairs to check. "She's not in her room."

"She was just in the kitchen."

The phone rang, and I picked it up.

"Hello?"

"It's Millon," came a soft voice, "and I'm sorry to call you at home."

"Where are you?"

"Look out the window."

I did as he asked and saw him wave from his usual spot between the compost heap and the laurels. Millon de Floss, it should be explained, was my official stalker. Even though I had long ago dropped to the bottom of the Z-class celebrity list, he had insisted on maintaining his benign stalkership

because, as he explained it, "we all need a retirement hobby." Since he had shown considerable fortitude during a sojourn into the Elan back in '88, I now counted him as a family friend, something that he always denied, when asked. "Friendship," he intoned soberly, "always damages the pest factor that is the essence of the bond between stalker and stalkee." None of the kids were bothered by him at all, and his early-warning capabilities were actually very helpful--he'd spotted Felix<sup>8</sup>, after all. Not that stalking was his sole job, of course. Aside from fencing cheese to the east of Swindon, he edited *Conspiracy Theorist* magazine and worked on my official biography, something that was taking longer than we had both thought.

"So what's the problem? You still up for the cheese buy this evening?" I asked him.

"Of course--but you've got visitors. A car on the street with two men in it and another man climbing over the back wall."

I thanked him and put the phone down. I'd made a few enemies in the past, so Landen and I had some prearranged contingency measures.

"Problems?" asked Landen.

"It's a code yellow."

Landen understood and without a word dashed off toward the front of the house. I opened the back door and crept out into the garden, took the side passage next to the dustbins and slipped behind the summer house. I didn't have to wait long, as a man wearing a black coverall and a balaclava helmet came tiptoeing up the path toward where I was hidden. He was carrying a sack and a bag of marshmallows. I didn't waste any time on pleasantries; I simply whacked him hard on the chin with my fist, and when he staggered, momentarily stunned, I thumped him in the chest, and he fell over backward with a grunt. I pulled off the balaclava to reveal a man I recognized--it was Arthur Plunkett of the Swindon Dodo Fanciers Guild.

"For GSD's sake, Arthur," I said, "how many times do I have to tell you that Pickwick's not for sale?"

"Uuuuh," he said, groaning and wheezing as he tried to regain his wind.



"Come on, idiot," I said as I heaved him up and rested him against the back of the summer house. "You know better than to break into my house--I can be dangerously protective of my family. Why do you think I'm the only one in Swindon able to leave my car unlocked at night?"

"Ooooooh."

"Wait here," I said to him, and trotted back indoors. I could be dangerous, but then so could Landen, even with one leg. The front door was open, and I could see him hiding behind the privet hedge. I ran low across the lawn and joined him.

"It's only dodo fanciers," I hissed.

"Again?" he replied. "After what happened last time?"

I nodded. Clearly, Pickwick's Version 1.2 rarity was a prize worth risking a lot for. I looked across the road to where a Buick was parked by the curb. The two men inside were wearing dark glasses and making a lot of effort to be inconspicuous.

"Shall we stop them?"

"No," giggled Landen. "They won't get far."

"What have you done?" I asked in my serious voice.

"You'll see."

As we watched, Arthur Plunkett decided to make a run for it--well, a hobble for it, actually--and came out through the gate and limped across the road. The driver of the car started up the engine, waited until Plunkett had thrown himself in the back, then pulled rapidly away from the curb. They got about twenty feet before the cable that Landen had tied around their rear axle whipped tight and, secured to a lamppost at the other end and far too strong to snap, it tore the axle and most of the suspension clear from the back of the car, which then almost pitched up onto its nose before falling with a crunch in the middle of the road. After a short pause, the three men climbed shakily out of the car and then legged it off down the street, Plunkett behind.

"Was that *really* necessary?" I asked.

"Not at all," admitted Landen through a series of childish giggles. "But I'd always wanted to try it."

"I wish you two would grow up."

We looked up. My brother Joffy and his partner, Miles, were

staring at us over the garden gate.

"I don't know what you mean," I said, getting up from where we'd been crouched behind the hedge and giving Landen a heave to get him on his feet. "It's just a normal evening in Swindon." I looked around, as the neighbors had come out to gawk at the wreck of the Buick and motioned Joffy and Miles inside. "Come on in for a cup of tea."

"No tea," said Joffy as we walked into the house. "We've just had a tankerful at Mum's--can't you hear me slosh as I walk?"

"And enough Battenberg cake to fill the Grand Canyon," added Miles in a stuffed-with-cake sort of voice.

"How's the carpet business, Doofus?" asked Joffy as we stood in the hall.

"Couldn't be better--how's the faith-unification business?"

"We've *nearly* got everyone," said Joffy with a smile. "The atheists came on board last week. Once we'd suggested that 'god' could be a set of essentially beneficent physical rules of the cosmos, they were only too happy to join. In fact, apart from a few scattered remnants of faith leaders who can't quite come to terms with the loss of their power, influence and associated funny hats, it's all looking pretty good."

Joffy's nominal leadership of the British Archipelago Branch of the Global Standard Deity was a matter of considerable import within the Next family. The GSD was proposed by delegates of the 1978 Global Interfaith Symposium and had gathered momentum since then, garnering converts from all the faiths into one diverse religion that was flexible enough to offer something for everyone.

"I'm amazed you managed to convert them all," I said.

"It wasn't a *conversion*," he replied, "it was a *unification*."

"And you are here now because...?"

"Landen said he'd videotape *Dr. Who* for me, and the Daleks are my favorite."

"I'm more into the Sontarans myself," said Miles.

"Humph!" said Joffy. "It's what I would expect from someone who thinks Jon Pertwee was the best Doctor."

Landen and I stared at him, unsure of whether we should agree, postulate a different theory--or what.

"It was Tom Baker," said Joffy, ending the embarrassed

silence. Miles made a noise that sounded like "conventionalist," and Landen went off to fetch the tape.

"Doofus?" whispered Joffy when Landen had gone.

"Yes?"

"Have you told him?"

"No," I whispered back.

"You can't *not* tell him, Thursday--if you don't tell him the truth about the BookWorld and Acme Carpets, it's like you're--I don't know--lying to him."

"It's for his own good," I hissed. "It's not like I'm having an affair or something."

"Are you?"

"No, of course not!"

"It's still a lie, sister dearest. How would you like it if he lied to you about what he did all day?"

"I daresay I'd not like it. Leave it to me, Joff--I'll be fine."

"I hope so. Happy birthday--and in case you hadn't noticed, there's some Camembert on fire in the hood of your Acme Carpets van."

"Some what?"

"Camembert. On fire."

"Here it is," said Landen, returning with a video. "Remembrance of the Daleks.' Where did Thursday go?"

"Oh, she just nipped out for something. Well, must be off! People to educate, persuade and unify--hopefully in that order. Ha-ha-ha."

"Sorry about that," I said, coming back from outside. "I thought I saw Pickwick make faces at the cat next door--you know how they hate each other."

"But she's over there," said Landen, pointing to where Pickwick was still struggling to look at herself and her blue-and-white stripy sweater in the mirror.

I shrugged. "Must have been another dodo."

"Is there another bald dodo in the neighborhood with a blue stripy cardigan? And can you smell burning cheese?"

"No," I said innocently. "What about you, Joff?"

"I've got to go," he repeated, staring at his watch. "Remember what I said, sister dearest!"

And he and Miles walked off toward the crowd that had

started to gather around the wrecked car.

"I swear I can smell burning cheese," said Landen as I shut the front door.

"Probably Mrs. Berko-Boyer cooking next door."

Outwardly I was worry-free, but inside I was more nervous. A chunk of burning Camembert on your doorstep meant only one thing: a warning from the Swindon Old Town Cheese Mafia--or, as they liked to be known, the Stiltonistas.

## 16.

### Cheese

The controversial Milk Levy from which the unpopular Cheese Duty is derived was imposed in 1970 by the then Whig government, which needed to raise funds for a potential escalation of war in the Crimea. With the duty now running at 1,530 percent on hard and 1,290 percent on smelly, illegal cheese making and smuggling had become a very lucrative business indeed. The Cheese Enforcement Agency was formed not only to supervise the licensing of cheese but also to collect the tax levied on it by an overzealous government. Small wonder that there was a thriving underground cheese market.

"Thanks for tipping us the wink about the dodo fanciers," I said as we drove through the darkened streets of Swindon two hours later. A tow truck had removed the wreckage of the fanciers' car, and the police had been around to collect statements. Despite its being a busy neighborhood, no one had seen anything. They had, of course, but the Parke-Laine-Nexts were quite popular in the area.

"Are you sure we weren't followed?" asked Millon as we pulled up outside an empty industrial unit not a stone's throw from the city's airship field.

"Positive," I replied. "Have you got buyers for it?"

"The usual cheeseheads are all champing at the bit, recipes at the ready. The evening air will be rich with the scent of Welsh rarebit to night."

A large seventy-seat airship rose slowly into the sky behind the factory units. We watched while its silver flanks caught the colors of the late-evening sun as it turned and, with its four propellers beating the still air with a rhythmic hum, set course for Southampton.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Ready," said Millon.

I beeped the horn twice, and the steel shutters were slowly

raised on the nearest industrial unit.

"Tell me," said Millon, "why do you think the Old Town Stiltonistas gave you the flaming Camembert?"

"A warning, perhaps. But we've never bothered them, and they've never bothered us."

"Our two territories don't even overlap," he observed. "Do you think the Cheese Enforcement Agency is getting bolder?"

"Perhaps."

"You don't seem very worried."

"The CEA is underfunded and knows nothing. Besides, we have customers to attend to--and Acme needs the cash. Think you can liberate five grand by tomorrow morning?"

"Depends what they've got," he said after a moment's reflection. "If they're trying to peddle common-or-garden Cheddardesque or that processed crap, then we could be in trouble. But if they've got something exotic, then no problem at all."

The roller shutter was high enough to let us in by now, and we drove inside, the shutter reversing direction to close behind us.

We climbed out of the van. The industrial unit was empty except for a large Welsh-registered Griffin-V8 truck, a long table with leather sample cases lying on it and four men wearing black suits with black ties and sunglasses and looking vaguely menacing. It was all bravado, of course--Scorsese movies were big in the Welsh Republic. I tried to see by the swing of their jackets if any of them were packing heat and guessed that they weren't. I'd only carried a gun once in the real world since SpecOps was disbanded and hoped I never had to again. Cheese smuggling was still a polite undertaking. As soon as it turned ugly, I was out.

"Owen Pryce the Cheese," I said in a genial manner, greeting the leader of the group with a smile and a firm handshake, "good to see you again. I trust the trip across the border was uneventful?"

"It's getting a lot harder these days," he replied in a singsong Welsh accent that betrayed his roots in the south of the republic, probably Abertawe. "There are dutymen everywhere, and the bribes I have to pay are reflected in the price of the

goods."

"As long as it's fair price, Pryce," I replied pleasantly. "My clients love cheese, but there's a limit to what they'll pay."

We were both lying, but it was the game we played. My clients would pay good money for high-quality cheese, and as likely as not he didn't bribe anyone. The border with Wales was 170 miles long and had more holes than a hastily matured Emmentaler. There weren't enough dutymen to cover it all, and to be honest, although it was illegal, no one took cheese smuggling that seriously.

Pryce nodded to one of his compatriots, and they opened the sample cases with a flourish. It was all there--every single make of cheese you could imagine, from pure white to dark amber. Crumbly, hard, soft, liquid, gas. The rich aroma of well-matured cheese escaped into the room, and I felt my taste buds tingle. This was top-quality shit--the best available.

"Smells good, Pryce."

He said nothing and showed me a large slab of white cheese. "Caerphilly," he said, "the best. We can--"

I put up a hand to stop him. "The punks can deal with the mild stuff, Pryce. We're interested in Level 3.8 and above."

He shrugged, set the Caerphilly down and picked up a small chunk of creamy-colored cheese.

"Quintuple Llanboidy," he announced, "a 5.2. It'll play on your taste buds like the plucked strings of a harp."

"We'll have the usual of that, Pryce," I muttered, "but my clients are into something a little stronger. What else you got?"

We always went through this charade. My specialty was the volatile cheese market, and when I say volatile, I don't mean the market--I mean the cheese.

Pryce nodded and showed me a golden yellow cheese that had veins of red running through it.

"Qua druple-strength Dolgellau Veinclotter," he announced. "It's a 9.5. Matured in Blaenafon for eighteen years and not for the fainthearted. Good on crackers but can function equally well as an amorous-skunk repellent."

I took a daringly large amount and popped it on my tongue. The taste was extraordinary; I could almost see the Cambrian Mountains just visible in the rain, low clouds, gushing water

and limestone crags, frost-shattered scree and--

"Are you all right?" said Millon when I opened my eyes. "You passed out for a moment there."

"Kicks like a mule, doesn't it?" said Pryce kindly. "Have a glass of water."

"Thank you. We'll take all you have--what else you got?"

"Mynachlog-ddu Old Contemptible," said Pryce, showing me a whitish crumbly cheese. "It's kept in a glass jar because it will eat through cardboard or steel. Don't leave it in the air too long, as it will start dogs howling."

"We'll have thirty kilos. What about this one?" I asked, pointing at an innocuous-looking ivory-colored soft cheese.

"Ystradgynlais Molecular Unstable Brie," announced Pryce, "a soft cheese we've cloned from our cheese-making brethren in France--but every bit as good. Useful as a contact anesthetic or a paint stripper, it can cure insomnia and ground to dust is a very useful self-defense against muggers and wandering bears. It has a half-life of twenty-three days, glows in the dark and can be used as a source of X-rays."

"We'll take the lot. Got anything *really* strong?"

Pryce raised an eyebrow, and his minders looked at one another uneasily. "Are you sure?"

"It's not for me," I said hastily, "but we've got a few serious cheeseheads who can take the hard stuff."

"We've got some Machynlleth Wedi Marw."

"What the hell's that?"

"It's what you asked for--*really* strong cheese. It'll bring you up in a rash just by looking at it. Denser than enriched plutonium, two grams can season enough macaroni and cheese for eight hundred men. The smell alone will corrode iron. A concentration in air of only seventeen parts per million will bring on nausea and unconsciousness within twenty seconds. Our chief taster ate a half ounce by accident and was dead to the world for six hours. Open only out of doors, and even then only with a doctor's certificate and well away from populated areas. It's not really a cheese for eating--it's more for encasing in concrete and dumping in the ocean a long way from civilization."

I looked at Millon, who nodded. There was *always* someone



stupid enough to experiment. After all, no one had ever died from cheese ingestion. Yet.

"Let us have a half pound, and we'll see what we can do with it."

"Very well," said Pryce. He nodded to a colleague, who opened another suitcase and gingerly took out a sealed lead box. He laid it gently on the table and then took a hurried step backward.

"You won't attempt to open it until we're at least thirty miles away, will you?" Pryce asked.

"We'll do our best."

"Actually, I'd advise you not to open it at all."

"Thanks for the advice."

The trading went on in this manner for another half hour, and with our order book full and the cost totted up, we transported the cheese from their truck to the Acme van, whose springs groaned under the weight.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing at a wooden crate in the back of their truck. It was securely fixed to the floor with heavy chains.

"That's nothing," Pryce said quickly, his henchmen moving together to try to block my view.

"Something you're not showing us?"

Pryce took me by the arm as they slammed the rear doors and threw the latch.

"You've always been a good customer, Ms. Next, but we know what you will and won't do, and this cheese is not for you."

"Strong?"

He wouldn't answer me.

"It's been nice doing business with you, Ms. Next. Same time next month?"

"Yes," I said slowly, wondering just how strong a cheese has to be before you've got to keep it chained down. More interestingly, the box was stenciled with the code X-14.

I handed over the Welsh cash, it was swiftly counted, and before I knew it, Owen Pryce and his marginally threatening flunkies had revved up the truck and vanished into the night, off to sell cheese to the Stiltonistas in the Old Town. I always

got first dibs--that was probably what the flaming Camembert was all about.

"Did you see that cheese chained up in the back?" I asked Millon as we got back into the van.

"No--what cheese?"

"Nothing."

I started the van, and we drove out of the industrial estate. This was the point at which the CEA would have pounced if they'd have known what was going on, but they didn't. All was quiet in the town, and within a few minutes Millon had dropped me off at home, taking the Acme van himself to start peddling the cheese.

I had only just opened the garden gate when I noticed a figure standing in the shadows. I instinctively moved to grab my pistol, before remembering that I didn't carry one in the Outland anymore. I needn't have worried: It was Spike.

"You made me jump!"

"Sorry," he replied soberly. "I came to ask you if you wanted any help disposing of the body."

"I'm sorry?"

"The body. The ground can be hard this time of year."

"Whose body?"

"Felix8. You did him in, right?"

"No."

"Then how did he escape? You, me and Stig have the only keys."

"Wait a moment," I said nervously. "Felix8 has *gone*?"

"Completely. Are you *sure* you didn't kill him?"

"I think I would have remembered."

"Well," said Spike, handing me a spade, "you better give this back to Landen, then." I must have looked horrified, because he added, "I told him it was to plant some garlic. Listen, you get inside and keep the doors and windows locked--I'll be in my car across the street if you need me."

I went into the house and locked the door securely behind me. Felix8 was a worry, but not tonight--I had a complimentary block of Llangloffan, and nothing was going to come between me and Landen's unbeatable macaroni and cheese.

## Breakfast Again

Commonsense Party leader Redmond van de Poste, MP, succeeded Chancellor Yorrick Kaine in the hastily called elections of 1988, changed the job title back to "prime minister" and announced a series of innovative policies. For a start he insisted that democracy, while a good idea for a good idea, was potentially vulnerable to predation by the greedy, egotistical and insane, so his plan to *demo cratize* democracy was ruthlessly implemented. There were initial issues regarding civil liberties, but now, fourteen years later, we were beginning to accrue the benefits.

The news on the radio that morning was devoted--once again--to the ongoing crisis of the week--namely, where the nation's stupidity surplus could be discharged safely. Some suggested a small war in a distant country against a race of people we weren't generally disposed toward, but others thought this too risky and favored crippling the efficiency of the public services by adding a new layer of bureaucracy at huge expense and little benefit. Not all suggestions were sensible: Fringe elements of the debate maintained that the nation should revitalize the stupendously costly Anti-Smite Shield project. Designed to protect mankind--or at least England--against the potential threat by an enraged deity eager to cleanse a sinful race with a rain of fire, the shield project would have the twin benefits of profligate waste of good cash plus the possibility that other European nations could be persuaded to join and thus deal with Europe's combined stupidity excess in one fell swoop.

Prime Minister Redmond van de Poste took the unusual step of speaking on live radio to not only reject all the suggestions but also to make the inflammatory statement that despite the escalating surplus they would continue the Commonsense approach to government. When asked how the stupidity

surplus might be reduced, Van de Poste replied that he was certain something would come along that "would be fantastically dim-witted but economical," and added that as a conciliatory dumb measure to appease his critics they would be setting fire to a large quantity of rubber tires for no very good purpose. This last remark was met with a cry of "too little, too late" from Mr. Alfredo Traficcone of the opposition Prevailing Wind Party, which was gradually gaining ground promoting policies of "immediate gain," something that Mr. Traficcone said was "utterly preferable to the hideously longsighted policies of cautious perceptiveness."

"What a load of old poo," said Landen, giving Tuesday a boiled egg for breakfast and putting one in front of Jenny's place, then yelling up the stairs to her that breakfast was on the table.

"What time did Friday get in last night?" I asked, since I had gone to bed first.

"Past midnight. He said he was making noise with his mates."

"The Gobshites?"

"I think so, but they might as well be called the Feedbacks and working on the single 'Static' from the *White Noise* album."

"It's only because we're old and fuddy-duddy," I said, resting an affectionate hand on his. "I'm sure the music we listened to was as much crap to our parents as his music is to us."

But Landen was elsewhere. He was composing an outline for a self-help book for dogs, called *Yes, You CAN Open the Door Yourself*, and was thus functionally deaf to everything.

"Land, I'm sleeping with the milkman."

He didn't look up, but said, "That's nice, darling."

Tuesday and I laughed, and I turned to look at her with an expression of faux shock and said, "What are you laughing about? You shouldn't know anything about milkmen!"

"Mum," she said with a mixture of precocity and matter-of-factness, "I have an IQ of two hundred and eighty and know more about everything than you do."

"I doubt it."

"Then what does the ischiocavernosus muscle do?"

"Okay, you *do* know more than I do. Where is Jenny? She's

*always* late for breakfast!"

I took the tram toward the old SpecOps Building to do some investigations. The escape of Felix8 was fresh in my mind, and several times I saw someone who I thought was him, but on each occasion it was a harmless passerby. I still had no idea how he had escaped, but one thing I *did* know was that the Hades family had some pretty demonic attributes, and they looked after their friends. Felix8, loathsome cur that he was, would have been considered a friend. If he was still in their pay, then I would have to speak to a member of the Hades family. It had to be Aornis: the only one in custody.

I got off the tram at the Town Hall and walked down the hill to the SpecOps Building. It was eerily deserted as I stepped in, a strong contrast to the hive of activity that I had known. I was issued a visitor's badge and headed off down the empty corridors toward the ChronoGuard's office. Not the briefing hall we had visited the previous evening but a small room on the second floor. I'd been here on a number of occasions, so knew what to expect--as I watched, the decor and furniture changed constantly, the ChronoGuard operatives themselves jumping in and out, their speed making them into little more than smears of light. There was one piece of furniture that remained unchanged while all about raced, moved and blurred in a never-ending jumble. It was a small table with an old candlestick telephone upon it, and as I put out my hand, it rang. I picked up the phone and held the ear-piece to my ear.

"Mrs. Parke-Laine-Next?" came a voice.

"Yes?"

"He'll be right down."

And in an instant he was. The room stopped moving from one time to the next and froze with a decor that looked vaguely contemporary. There was a figure at the desk who smiled when he saw me. But it wasn't Bendix or my father--it was *Friday*. Not the mid-twenties Friday I'd met at my wedding bash or the old Friday I'd met during the Samuel Pepys Fiasco but a young Friday--almost indistinguishable from the one who was still fast asleep at home, snoring loudly in the pit of despair we called his bedroom.

"Hi, Mum!"

"Hi, Sweetpea," I said, deeply confused and also kind of relieved. This was the Friday I thought I was meant to have--clean-cut, well presented, confident and with an infectious smile that reminded me of Landen. And he probably bathed more than once a fortnight, too.

"How old are you?" I asked, placing a hand on his chin to make sure he was real, and not a phantasm or something, like Mycroft. He *was* real. Warm and still needing to shave only once a week.

"I'm sixteen, Mum, the same age as the lazy slob asleep at home. In a context that you'd understand, I'm a *Potential* Friday. I started with the Junior Time Scouts at thirteen and popped my first tube at fifteen--the youngest ever to do so. The Friday you know is the Friday *Present*. The older me that will hopefully be the director-general is the Friday *Last*, and because he's indisposed due to a mild temporal ambiguity caused by the younger alternative me not joining the Time Scouts, Bendix reconstituted me from the echoes of the might-have-been. They asked me to see what I can do."

"Nope," I replied in some confusion, "didn't understand a word."

"It's a split-timeline thing, Mum," explained Friday, "in which two versions of the same person can exist at the same time."

"So can't *you* become the director-general at the other end of time?"

"Not that easy. The alternative timelines have to be in concurrence to go forward to a mutually compatible future."

I understood--sort of.

"I guess this means you haven't invented time travel yet?"

"Nope. Any idea why the other me is such a slouch?"

"I asked you to join the Time Scouts three years ago, but you couldn't be bothered," I murmured by way of explanation. "You were too busy playing on computer games and watching TV."

"I don't blame you or Dad. Something's seriously out of joint, but I don't know what. Friday Present seems to have the intelligence but not the pizzazz to want to do anything."

"Except play the guitar in the Gobshites."

"If you can call it playing," said Friday with an unkind laugh.

"Don't be so--" I checked myself. If this wasn't self-criticism, I didn't know what was.

All of a sudden, there was *another* Friday standing next to Potential Friday. He was identical, except he was carrying a manila folder. They looked at each other curiously. The newest Friday said "Sorry" in an embarrassed fashion and walked a little way down the corridor, where he pretended to be interested in the carved wood around the doorframe.

"This morning I only had one son," I muttered despondently. "Now I've got three!"

Friday glanced at the second Friday over his shoulder, who was caught staring at us and quickly looked the other way. "You've only got one, Mum. Don't worry about him."

"So what's gone wrong?" I asked. "Why is Friday Present so unlike Potential Friday?"

"It's difficult to tell. This 2002 isn't like the one in the Standard History Eventline. Everyone seems introspective and lacking in any sort of charisma. It's as though a heavy sky is forcing lassitude on the population--in a word, a *grayness* seems to have spread across the land."

"I know what you mean," I said, shaking my head sadly. "We've seen a sixty percent drop in book readership; it seems no one can be bothered to invest their time in a good novel."

"That would figure," replied Friday thoughtfully. "It's not supposed to be like this, I assure you--the best minds have it as the beginning of the Great Unraveling. If what we suspect is true and time travel isn't invented in the next three and a half days, we might be heading toward a spontaneously accelerated inverse obliteration of all history."

"Can you put that into a carpet metaphor I might understand?"

"If we can't secure our existence right at the beginning, time will start to roll up like a carpet, taking history with it."

"How fast?"

"It will begin slowly at 22:03 on Friday with the obliteration of the earliest fossil record. Ten minutes after that, all evidence of ancient hominids will vanish, swiftly followed by the sudden absence of everything from the middle Holocene.

Five minutes later all megalithic structures will vanish as if they'd never been. The pyramids will go in another two minutes, with ancient Greece vanishing soon after. In the course of another minute, the Dark Ages will disappear, and in the next twenty seconds the Norman Conquest will never have happened. In the final twenty-seven seconds, we will see modern history disappear with increased rapidity, until at 22:48 and nine seconds the end of history will catch up with us and there will be nothing left at all, nor any evidence that there was--to all intents and purposes, we won't ever have existed."

"So what's the cause?"

"I've no idea, but I'm going to have a good look around. Did you want something?"

"Oh--yes. I need to speak to Aornis. One of her family's old henchmen is on the prowl--or was."

"Wait a moment."

And in an instant he was gone.

"Ah!" said the other Friday, returning from just up the corridor.

"Sorry about that. Enloopment records are kept in the twelfth millennium, and being accurate to the second on a ten-thousand-year jump is still a bit beyond me."

He opened the manila file and flicked through the contents.

"She's done seven years of a thirty-year looping for unlawful memory distortion," he murmured. "We had to hold her trial in the thirty-seventh century, where it actually *is* a crime. The dubious legality of being tried outside one's own time zone would have been cause for an appeal, but she never lodged one."

"Perhaps she forgot."

"It's possible. Shall we go?"

We stepped outside the SpecOps Building, turned left and walked the short distance to the Brunel Shopping Centre.

"Have you seen anything of my father?" I asked. I hadn't seen him for over a year, not since the last potential life-extinguishing Armageddon anyway.

"I see him flash past from time to time," replied Friday, "but he's a bit of an enigma. Sometimes we're told to hunt him



down, and the next moment we're working under him. Sometimes he's even *leading* the hunt for himself. Listen, I'm ChronoGuard and even I can't figure it out. Ah! We're here."

I looked up and frowned. We didn't seem to be "here" anywhere in particular--we were outside T.J. Maxx, the discount clothes store.

## Aornis Hades

They called it being "in the loop," but the official name was Closed Loop Temporal Field Containment. It was used only for criminals where there was little hope of rehabilitation, or even contrition. It was run by the ChronoGuard and was frighteningly simple. They popped the convict in an eight-minute repetitive time loop for five, ten, twenty years. The prisoner's body aged but never needed sustenance. It was cruel and unnatural--yet cheap and required no bars, guards or food.

We walked into the Swindon T. J. Maxx, threaded our way through the busy morning bargain hunters and found the manager, a well-dressed woman with an agreeable manner who had been in my class at school but whose name I had forgotten--we always gave polite nods to each other, but nothing more than that. Friday showed her his ID. She smiled and led us to a keypad mounted on the wall. The manager punched in a long series of numbers, and then Friday punched an even *longer* series of numbers. There was a shift in the light to a greeny blue, the manager and all the customers stopped dead in their tracks as time ground to a halt, and a faint buzz replaced the happy murmur of shoppers.

Friday looked at the manila folder he was carrying and then around the store. The illumination was similar to the cool glow you get from underwater lights in a swimming pool, with reflections that danced on the ceiling. Within the bluey greenness of the store's interior, I could see spheres of warm light, and within these there seemed to be some life. We walked past several of these spheres, and I noted that while most of the people inside were dark and indistinct, at least one was more vivid than the rest and looking very much alive--the prisoner.

"She should be at Checkout Six," said Friday, leading the

way past a ten-foot-wide translucent yellow sphere that was centered on the chair outside the changing rooms. "That's Reginald Danforth," murmured Friday. "He assassinated Mahatma Winston Smith al Wazeed during his historic speech to the citizens of the World State in 3419. Looped for seven hundred and ninety-eight years in an eight-minute sliver of time where he's waiting for his girlfriend, Trudi, to try on a camisole."

"Does he know he's looped?"

"Of course."

I looked at Danforth, who was staring at the floor and clenching and unclenching his fists in frustration.

"How long's he been in?"

"Thirty-four years. If he tells us who his co-conspirator was, we'll enlarge his loop from eight minutes to fifteen."

"Do you loop people just in stores?"

"We used to use dentists' waiting rooms, bus stops and cinemas during Merchant-Ivory films, as these tended to be natural occurrences of slow time, but there were too many prisoners, so we had to design our own. Temporal-J, Maximum Security--why, what did you think T.J. Maxx was?"

"A place to buy designer-label clothing at reasonable prices?"

He laughed. "The very idea! Next you'll be telling me that IKEA just sells furniture you have to build yourself."

"Isn't it?"

"Of course not. Here she is."

We had approached the checkout, where a sphere of warm light about eighteen feet wide encompassed most of the till and a line of bored-looking shoppers. Right at the back of the queue was a familiar face: Aornis Hades, younger sister of Acheron. She was a Mnemonomorph--someone with the ability to control memories. I'd defeated her good and proper, twice in the real world and once in my head. She was slim, dark and attractive and dressed in the very latest fashion--but only from when she was looped seven years ago. Mind you, because of the vague meanderings of the fashion industry, she'd been in and out of high style twenty-seven times since then and was currently in--although she'd never know it. To a looped individual, time remains the same.

"You know she can control coincidences?"

"Not anymore," replied Friday, with a grimness that I found disconcerting in one so young.

"Who are they?" I asked, pointing at the other women in the line for the checkout.

"They're not prisoners--just real shoppers doing real shopping at the time of her enloopment; Miss Hades is stuck in an eight-minute zone waiting to pay for goods, but she never does. If it's true what they say about her love of shopping, this punishment is *particularly* apt."

"Do I have anything to bargain with?"

Friday looked at the file. "You can stretch her loop by twenty minutes."

"How do I get to talk to her?"

"Just step inside the sphere of influence."

I took a deep breath and walked into the globe of yellow light. All of a sudden, normality returned with a jerk. I was back in what seemed like real life. It was raining outside, which was what must have been happening when she was looped. Aornis, well used to the monotonous round of limited dialogue during her eight-minute existence, noticed me immediately.

"Well, well," she murmured sarcastically, "is it visitors' day already?"

"Hello, Aornis," I said with a smile. "Remember me?"

"Very funny. What do you want, Next?"

I offered her a small vanity case with some cosmetics in it that I had picked off a shelf earlier. She didn't take it.

"Information," I said.

"Is there a deal in the offing?"

"I can give you another ten minutes. It's not much, but it's something."

She looked at me, then all around her. She knew that people were outside the sphere looking in, but not how many and who. She had the power to wipe memories but not read minds. If she could, she'd know how much I hated her. Mind you, she probably knew that already.

"Next, please!" said the checkout girl, and Aornis put two dresses and a pair of shoes on the counter.

"How's the family, Thursday--Landen and Friday and the girls?"

"Information, Aornis."

She took a deep breath as the loop jumped back to the beginning of her eight minutes and she was once more at the rear of the line. She clenched her fists so tightly her knuckles went white. She'd been doing this for ten years without respite. The only thing worse than a loop was a loop in which one suffered a painful trauma, such as a broken leg. But even the most sadistic judges could never find it in themselves to order that.

Aornis calmed herself, looked up at me and said, "Give me twenty minutes and I'll tell you what you want to know."

"I want to know about Felix8."

"That's not a name I've heard for a while," replied Aornis evenly. "What's your interest in that empty husk?"

"He was hanging around my house with a loaded gun yesterday," I told her, "and I can only assume he was wanting to do me harm."

Aornis looked mildly perturbed. "You saw him?"

"With my own eyes."

"Then I don't understand. After Acheron's untimely end, Felix8 seemed rather at a loss. He came around to the house and was making a nuisance of himself, very like an abandoned dog."

"So what happened?"

"Cocytus put him down."

"I'm assuming you don't mean in the sense of 'to humiliate.'"

"You think correct."

"And when was this?"

"In 1986."

"Did you witness the murder? Or see the body?" I stared at her carefully, trying to determine if she was telling the truth.

"No. He just *said* he had. You could have asked him yourself, but you killed him, didn't you?"

"He was evil. He brought it upon himself."

"I wasn't being serious," replied Aornis. "It's what passes for humor in the Hades family."

"This doesn't really help me," I murmured.

"That's nothing to do with me," replied Aornis. "You wanted intel, and I gave it to you."

"If I find out you've lied," I said, getting ready to leave, "I'll be back to take away the twenty minutes I gave you."

"If you've seen Felix8, how could you think otherwise?" pointed out Aornis with impeccable logic.

"Stranger things have happened."

I stepped out of the loop cell and was back in the bluey greenness of T.J. Maxx among the time-frozen customers, with Friday at my side.

"Think she's telling the truth?" he asked.

"If she is, it makes no sense at all, which is a point in her favor. If she'd told me what I wanted to hear, I'd have been more suspicious. Did she say anything else to me she might have made me forget?"

Aornis, with her power of memory distortion and erasure, was wholly untrustworthy--she could tell you everything, only to make you forget it a few seconds later. At her trial the judge and jury were merely actors--the real judge and jury watched it all on CCTV. To this day the actors in the courtroom still have no idea why that "frightfully pleasant girl" was in the dock at all. Friday ran over what he had witnessed her saying, and we managed to find an exchange that she'd erased from my recollection: that she was going to bust out of T.J. Maxx with the help of someone "on the outside."

"Any idea who that might be?" I asked. "And why did she shield it from me?"

"No idea--and it's probably just her being manipulative; my guess is the recollection will be on time release--it'll pop into your head in a few hours."

I nodded. She'd done something similar to me before.

"But I wouldn't worry," added Friday. "Temporal Enloopment has a hundred percent past-present-future escape-free record; she'd have to bend the Standard History Eventline to get out."

I left Aornis to her never-ending wait at the checkout, and Friday powered down the visitors' interface. The manager popped back into life as time started up again.

"Did you get all you need?" she asked pleasantly.

"I hope so," I replied, and followed Friday from the store.  
"Thanks," I said, giving him a motherly hug and a kiss.

"Mum," he said in a serious tone.

"What?"

"There's something I need to suggest to you, and you're going to have to think really carefully before you reply."

"What is it?"

"It's Friday. The *other* Friday. We've got two and a half days to the End of Time. Does it seriously look like he's going to join the ChronoGuard?"

"It's possible."

"Mum--truthfully?"

"No."

"We're running out of options fast. My director-general older self is still absent at the End of Time, so I had a word with Bendix, and he suggested we try...*replacement*."

"What do you mean?"

"That your Friday is removed and I take his place."

"Define 'removed.'"

Friday scratched his head.

"We've run several timestream models, and it looks good. I'm precisely the same age as him, and I'm what he *would* be like if he hadn't gone down the bone-idle route. If 'replacement' isn't a good word for you, why not think of it as just rectifying a small error in the Standard History Eventline."

"Let me get this straight," I said. "You want to murder my son and replace him with yourself? I only met you ten minutes ago."

"I'm your son, Mum. Every memory, good or bad is as much a part of me as it is the Friday at home. You want me to prove it? Who else knows about the BookWorld? One of your best friends is Melanie Bradshaw, who's a gorilla. It's true she let me climb all over the furniture and swing from the light fixtures. I can speak

**Courier Bold**

and Lorem Ipsum and even unpeel a banana with my feet--want me to show you?"

"No," I said. "I accept that you're my son. But you can't kill the other Friday--he's done nothing wrong. I won't let you."

"Mum! Which Friday would you rather have? The feckless, lazy ass or me?"

"You don't understand what it is to be a mother, Friday. The answer's no. I'll take the Friday I'm dealt."

"I thought you might say that," he said in a harsher manner. "I'll report back to Scintilla, but if the ChronoGuard feels there's no alternative, we might decide to go ahead anyway--with or without your permission."

"I think we've spoken enough," I said, keeping my anger at bay. "Do one thing for me: Tell me how long you think I have until they might take that action."

He shrugged. "Forty-eight hours?"

"Promise?"

"I promise," said Friday. "By the way, have you told Dad about all your Jurisdiction work? You said you were going to."

"I will--soon, I promise. Good-bye, darling."

And I kissed him again and walked away, boiling with inner rage. Fighting with the ChronoGuard was like fighting city hall. You couldn't win. Every way I looked at it, Friday's days were numbered. But, paradoxically, they weren't--the Friday I had just spoken to was the one I was meant to have and the one I'd met in the future, the one who made sure he escaped Landen's eradication and the one who whipped up the timephoon in the Dark Ages to cover up St. Zvlkx's illegal time fraud. I rubbed my head. Time travel was like that--full of impossible paradoxes that defied explanation and made theoretical physicists' brains turn to something resembling guacamole. But at least I still had two days to figure out a way to save the lazy good-for-nothing loafer that was my son. Before then, though, I needed to find out just how Goliath had managed to send a probe into fiction.



## The Goliath Corporation

The Isle of Man had been an independent corporate state within England since it was appropriated for the greater fiscal good in 1963. It had hospitals and schools, a university, its own fusion reactor and also, leading from Douglas to Kennedy Graviport in New York, the world's only privately run Gravitube. The Isle of Man was home to almost two hundred thousand people who did nothing but support, or support the support, of the one enterprise that dominated the small island: the Goliath Corporation.

I hopped on the Skyrail at the Brunel Shopping Centre and went the three stops to Swindon's Clary-LaMarr Travelport, where I caught the bullet train to Saknussem International. From there I jumped on the next Overmantle Gravitube with seconds to spare and was at James Tarbuck Graviport in Liverpool in a journey time of just over an hour. The country's hyperefficient public transport network was the Commonsense Party's greatest achievement so far. Very few people used cars for journeys over ten miles these days. The system had its detractors, of course--the car-parking consortiums were naturally appalled, as was the motorway service industry, which had taken the extraordinary step of producing decent food in order to win back customers.

I made good use of the time by calling Landen and telling him all about the alternative Friday's offer: to replace our idle and mostly bedridden headbanger of a son with a well-groomed, upright and responsible member of society, and Landen had agreed with me--that we'd keep the smelly one we had, thank you very much. Once I'd tubed to Tarbuck, I took the high-speed Ekrano-plane all the way to the distinctly unimaginatively titled Goliathopolis on what had once been the Isle of Man. Despite losing nearly everything during the dramatic St. Zvlx adventure back in 1988, the vast

multinational had staged an impressive comeback--mostly, it was said, by hiding its net worth and filing for bankruptcy on a subsidiary company that conveniently emerged from the distant past to take a lot of the flak. Timefoolery was suggested, but despite an investigation by the ChronoGuard's Fiscal Chronuption Unit, which looked very closely at such matters, no wrongdoing had been found--or could be proved. After that it didn't take long for the corporation to reestablish itself, and Goliathopolis was once again the Hong Kong of the Western Hemisphere, a forest of glassy towers striding up the hillside toward Snaefell.

Even before we left the dock at Tarbuck International, I had the idea that I was being watched. As the Goliath ground-effect transport jetted across the Irish Sea, several of the Goliath employees on the craft looked at me cautiously, and when I sat down in the coffee shop, the people near me moved away. It was kind of flattering, really, but since I had trounced the corporation in the very biggest way possible at least once, they clearly regarded me as something of a threat. How big a threat was revealed to me when we docked at Goliathopolis forty minutes later. There was a welcoming committee already waiting for me. But I don't mean "welcoming committee" in the ironic sense of large men with no necks and blackjacks--they had laid out the red carpet, bedecked the jetty with bunting and put on a baton-twirling demonstration by the Goliathopolis Majorettes. More important, the entire upper echelons of Goliath management had turned out to greet me, which included the president, John Henry Goliath V, and a dozen or so of his executive officers, all of whom had a look of earnest apprehension etched upon their pasty faces. As someone who'd cost the company dearly over the past two decades, I was clearly feared--and possibly even revered.

"Welcome back to Goliathopolis," said John Henry politely, shaking my hand warmly. "I hope that your stay is a happy one and that what ever brings you here can be a matter of mutual concern. I hardly need to stress the respect in which we hold you and would hate that you might find reason to act upon us without first entertaining the possibility of a misunderstanding."

He was a large man. It looked as though someone had handed his parents a blueprint of a baby and told them to scale it up by a factor of one and a quarter.

"This is a joke, right?"

"On the contrary, Ms. Next. Based on past experiences, we have decided that complete and utter disclosure is the only policy worth pursuing as far as your good self is concerned."

"You'll excuse me if I remain unconvinced by your perceived honesty."

"It's not honesty, Ms. Next. You *personally* cost us over a hundred billion pounds in lost revenue, so we regard our openness as a sound business strategy--albeit of an abstract nature. Because of this, there is no door closed to you, no document unreadable, no member to whom you may not speak. I hope I am candid?"

"Very," I replied, put off my guard by the corporation's attitude. "I have a matter I'd like to discuss with you."

"Naturally," replied John Henry. "The majorettes would like to perform, if that's all right with you?"

"Of course."

So we watched the majorettes march up and down for twenty minutes to music of the Goliath Brass Band, and when it was over, I was driven in John Henry's Bentley toward the Goliath head office, a mighty 110-story building right at the heart of Goliathopolis.

"Your son and family are well?" asked John Henry, who aside from a few more gray hairs didn't seem to have aged a great deal since we last met. He fixed me with his piercing green eyes and poured on the natural charm he'd been blessed with.

"I expect you know full well they are," I replied, "and everything else about me."

"On the contrary," protested John Henry. "We thought that if even the sniff of surveillance was detected, you might decide to take action, and action from you, as we have seen to our cost, is never less than devastating to our interests."

"Ah," I murmured, suddenly realizing why there had been a deafening silence from Goliath over the years.

"So how can we help?" asked John Henry. "If," he added, "we

can help at all."

"I want to find out what advances you have made in transfictional travel."

John Henry raised his eyebrows and smiled genially. "I never thought it would remain a secret from you forever."

"You've been leaving Outlander probes scattered all over the BookWorld."

"The research and development on the Book Project has been somewhat hit or miss, I'll admit that," replied John Henry candidly. "To be honest, I had expected you to call on us sooner than you have."

"I've been busy."

"Of course. And since you are here, perhaps you would grace us with your comments on the technical aspects of our project."

"I promise nothing, but I'd certainly like to see what you're up to."

The car drove toward the glassy modern towers of the corporate center of the multinational and past well-tailored executives going about their administrative business. A few minutes later, we pulled up outside the front entrance of the Goliath headquarters, which was comfortably nestled into the hillside.

"I don't suppose that you would want to freshen up or anything before we show you around?" asked John Henry hopefully.

"And miss something you might try and hide from me?" I answered. "No, if it's all the same to you, I'd really like to see how far you've gotten."

"Very well," said John Henry without any sense of concern, "come with me."

We walked into the expansive lobby and crossed not to the elevators or the Apologarium, where I'd been last time, but to where a golf cart was at the ready. A curious crowd of Goliath employees had gathered to watch our progress with undisguised inquisitiveness. I couldn't think it was just me--I don't suppose many of them had ever seen John Henry Goliath either.

We drove out of the lobby and into a tunnel that led directly

back into the hillside. It was crudely utilitarian after the simple elegance of the entrance vestibule, with roughly concreted walls and lit by overhead track lights. The roadway was smooth concrete, and there were cable conduits attached to the walls. The subterranean vaults of Goliath R&D were at least half a mile inside the hill, and on the journey, John Henry and I chatted amiably about national politics and global economics. Surprisingly, a more intelligent and well-informed conversation about current affairs I have yet to have. I might even have liked him, but for the utter ruthlessness and singularity of purpose that ran through his speech. Excusable in a person of little or no power, but potentially devastating in one such as John Henry Goliath.

We encountered three different levels of security on the way, each of them waved aside by John Henry. Beyond the third security checkpoint was a large set of steel blast doors, and after abandoning the golf cart we proceeded on foot. John Henry had his tie knot scanned to confirm his identity, and the doors slid open to let us in. I gasped at the sight that met my eyes. Their technology had gone beyond the small metal probe I'd already seen. It had gone further--*much* further.

### ***The Austen Rover***

I had been aware for many years of Goliath's endeavors to enter fiction. Following their abortive attempt to use the fictional world to "actualize" flawed technology during the Plasma Rifle debacle of '85, they had embarked upon a protracted R&D project to try to emulate Mycroft's Prose Portal. Until the appearance of the probe, the furthest I thought they'd gotten was to synthesize a form of stodgy grunge from volumes one to eight of *The World of Cheese*.

In the center of the room and looking resplendent in the blue-and-yellow livery of some long-forgotten bus company was a flat-fronted single-decker bus that to my mind dated from the fifties. Something my mother, in her long-forgotten and now much-embellished youth, might have boarded for a trip to the seaside, equipped with hampers of food and gallons of ice cream. Aside from the anachronistic feel, the most obvious feature of the bus was that the wheels had been removed and the voids covered over to give the vague appearance of streamlining. Clearly, it wasn't the only modification. The vehicle in front of me now was probably the most advanced piece of transport technology known to man.

"Why base it on an old bus?" I asked.

John Henry shrugged. "If you're going to travel, do it in style. Besides, a Rolls-Royce Phantom II doesn't have enough seats."

We walked down to the workshop floor, and I took a closer look. On both sides at the rear of the bus and on the roof were small faired outriggers that each held a complicated engine with which I was not familiar. The tight-fitting cowlings had been removed, and the engines were being worked on by white-coated technicians who had stopped what they were doing as soon as we walked in but now resumed their tinkering with a buzz of muted whispers. I moved closer to the

front of the bus and ran my fingers across the Leyland badge atop the large and very prominent radiator. I looked up. Above the vertically split front windshield was a glass-covered panel that once told prospective passengers the ultimate destination of the bus. I expected it to read BOURNEMOUTH or PORTSMOUTH but it didn't. It read NORTHANGER ABBEY.

I looked at John Henry Goliath, who said, "This, Ms. Next, is the *Austen Rover*--the most advanced piece of transfictional technology in the world!"

"Does it work?" I asked.

"We're not entirely sure," remarked John Henry. "It's the prototype and has yet to be tested."

He beckoned to the technician who seemed to be in charge and introduced us.

"This is Dr. Anne Wirthlass, the project manager of the *Austen Rover*. She will answer any questions you have--I hope perhaps you will answer some of ours?"

I made a noncommittal noise, and Wirthlass gave me a hand to shake. She was tall, willowy and walked with a rolling gait. Like everyone in the lab, she wore a white coat with her Goliath ID badge affixed to it, and although I could not see her precise laddernumber, she was certainly within four figures--the top 1 percent. *Seriously* important.

"I'm pleased to meet you at last," she said in a Swedish accent. "We have much to learn from your experience."

"If you know *anything* about me," I responded, "you'll know exactly why it is that I don't trust Goliath."

"Ah!" she said, somewhat taken aback. "I thought we'd left those days behind us."

"I'll need convincing," I returned without malice. It wasn't her fault, after all. I indicated the tour bus. "How does it work?"

She looked at John Henry, who nodded his permission.

"The *Austen Rover* is a standard Leyland Tiger PS2/3 under a Burlingham body," she began, touching the shiny coachwork fondly, "but with a few...modifications. Come aboard."

She stepped up into the bus, and I followed her. The interior had been stripped and replaced with the very latest technology, which she attempted to explain in the sort of

technical language where it is possible to understand only one word in eight, if you're lucky. I came off the bus ten minutes later having absorbed not much more than the fact that it had twelve seats, carried a small thirty-megawatt fusion device in the rear and couldn't be tested--its first trip would be either an utter failure or a complete success, nothing in between.

"And the probes?"

"Yes, indeed," replied Wirthlass. "We've been using a form of gravity-wave inducer to catapult a small probe into fiction on a one-minute free-return trajectory--think of it as a very large yo-yo. We aimed them at the Dune series, because it was a large and very wordy target that was probably somewhere near the heart of Science Fiction, and after seven hundred and ninety-six subfictional flights we hit pay dirt: The probe returned with a twenty-eight-second audiovisual recording of Paul Atreides riding a sandworm."

"When was this?" I asked.

"In 1996. We fared better after that and by a system of trial and error have managed to figure out that individual books seem to be clumped together in groups. We've started plotting a map--I'll show you if you like."

We walked into a room next door that seemed to be filled to capacity with computers and their operators.

"How many probe missions have you sent?"

"About seventy thousand," said John Henry, who had followed us. "Most come back without recording anything, and over eight thousand never return at all. In total we have had four hundred and twenty successful missions. As you can see, getting into fiction for us is at present a somewhat haphazard affair. The *Austen Rover* is ready for its first trip--but by simple extrapolation of the probe figures, every journey has a one-in-eight chance of not returning, and only a one-in-one-hundred-and-sixty possibility of hitting something."

I could see what they were up against--and why. They were hurling probes into a BookWorld that was 80 percent Nothing. The thing was, I could pretty much draw from memory a genre map of the BookWorld. With my help they might actually make it.

"This is the BookWorld as we think it exists," explained John



Henry, laying out a large sheet of paper on a desk. It was patchy in the extreme and full of errors. It was a bit like throwing Ping-Pong balls into a dark furniture store and then trying to list the contents by the noises they made.

"This will take you a long time to figure out," I murmured.

"Time that we don't really have, Ms. Next. Despite my position as president, even I have to concede that the amount spent will never be recouped. All funding for this project will be withdrawn in a week."

It was the first time I'd felt any sort of relief since I arrived. The idea of Goliath's even setting so much as a toe inside fiction filled me with utter dread. But one question still niggled at me.

"Why?"

"I'm sorry?" said John Henry.

"Why are you trying to get into fiction at all?"

"Book tourism," he replied simply. "The *Austen Rover* was designed to take twelve people around the high points of Jane Austen's work. At five hundred pounds for a twenty-minute hop around the most-loved works, we thought at the time it would be quite profitable. Mind you, that was nine years ago, when people were still reading books."

"We thought it might reinvigorate the classics," added Wirthlass.

"And your interest in the classics?"

It was John Henry who answered. "We feel that publishing in general and books in particular are well worth hanging on to."

"You'll excuse me if I'm not convinced by your supposed altruism."

"No altruism, Ms. Next. The fall in revenue of our publishing arm has been dramatic, and since we own little in the way of computer games or consoles, the low ReadRate is something that affects us financially. I think you'll find that we're together on this one. What we want is what *you* want. Even though our past associations have not been happy and I understand your distrust, Goliath in its reborn shape is not quite the all-devouring corporation that you think it is."

"I haven't been in the BookWorld since the days of *The Eyre*

*Affair."*

John Henry coughed politely. "You knew about the probes, Ms. Next."

Damn.

"I have...contacts over there."

I could tell they didn't believe me, but that was tough. I'd seen enough.

"Looks like you've wasted a lot of money," I said.

"With or without you, we're going to test it on Friday evening," announced Wirthlass. "I and two others have decided to risk all and take her out for a spin. We may not return, but if we do, then the data gained would be priceless!"

I admired her courage, but it didn't matter--I wasn't going to tell them what I knew.

"Just explain one thing," said Wirthlass. "Is the force of gravity entirely normal in the BookWorld?"

"What about the universality of physical laws?" piped up a second technician, who'd been watching us.

"And communication between books--is such a thing possible?"

Before long there were eight people, all asking questions about the BookWorld that I could have answered with ease--had I any inclination to do so.

"I'm sorry," I said as the questions reached a crescendo. "I can't help you!"

They were all quiet and stared at me. To them this project was everything, and to see its cancellation without fruition was clearly a matter of supreme frustration--especially as they suspected I had the answers.

I made my way toward the exit and was joined by John Henry, who had not yet given up trying to charm me.

"Will you stay for lunch? We have the finest chefs available to make what ever you want."

"I run a carpet shop, Mr. Goliath, and I'm late for work."

"A carpet shop?" he echoed with incredulity. "That sells carpets?"

"All sorts of floor coverings, actually."

"I would offer you discounted carpets for life in order for you to help us," he said, "but from what I know of you, such a

course would be unthinkable. My private Dakota is at Douglas Graviport if you want to use it to fly straight home. I ask for nothing but say only this: We are doing this for the preservation and promotion of books and reading. Try to find it in your heart to consider what we are doing here in an objective light."

We had by now walked outside the building, and John Henry's Bentley pulled up in front of us.

"My car is yours. Good day, Ms. Next."

"Good day, Mr. Goliath."

He shook my hand and then departed. I looked at the Bentley and then at the ranks of cabs a little way down the road. I shrugged and climbed in the back of the Bentley.

"Where to, madam?" asked the driver.

I thought quickly. I had my TravelBook on me and could jump to the Great Library from here--as long as I could find a quiet spot conducive to bookjumping.

"The nearest library," I told him. "I'm late for work."

"You're a librarian?" he inquired politely.

"Let's just say I'm really into books."

## Holmes

I don't know what it was about traveling to and from the BookWorld that dehydrated me so much. It had gotten progressively worse, almost without my noticing, a bit like a mildly increased girth and skin that isn't as elastic as it used to be. On the upside, however, the textual environment kept all the aches and pains at bay. I hardly noticed my bad back in the BookWorld and was never troubled by headaches.

A few minutes and several pints of rehydrating water later, I walked into the Jurisfiction offices at Norland Park. Thursday5 was waiting for me by my desk, looking decidedly pleased with herself.

"Guess what!" she enthused.

"I have no idea."

"Go on, guess!"

"I don't want to guess," I told her, hoping the tedium in my voice would send out a few warning bells. It didn't.

"No, you *must* guess!"

"Okay," I sighed. "You've got some new beads or something."

"Wrong," she said, producing a paper bag with a flourish. "I got you the bacon roll you wanted!"

"I never would have guessed *that*," I replied, sitting before a desk that seemed to be flooded with new memos and reports, adding, in an unthinking moment, "How are things with you?"

"I didn't sleep very well last night."

I rubbed my forehead as she sat down and stared at me intently, hands clasped nervously in front of her. I didn't have the heart to tell her that my inquiry over her health was merely politeness. I didn't actually want to know. Quite the reverse, in fact.

"Really?" I said, trying to find a memo that might be vaguely relevant to something.

"No. I was thinking about the Minotaur incident yesterday,

and I want to apologize--again."

"It's past history. Any messages?"

"So I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted. Now: Any messages?"

"I wrote you a letter outlining my apology."

"I won't read it. The matter is closed."

"Yes...well...right," she began, flustered that we weren't going to analyze the previous day at length and trying to remember everything she'd been told that morning. "Mr. Bunuel called to say that he'd completed the refit of *Pride and Prejudice* and it was online again this morning. He's got *Northanger Abbey* in the maintenance bay at the moment, and it should be ready on time as long as Catherine stops attempting to have the book 'Gothicized.'"

"Good. What else?"

"The Council of Genres," she announced, barely able to control her excitement. "Senator Jobsworth's secretary *herself* called to ask you to appear in the debating chamber for a policy-directive meeting at three this afternoon!"

"I wonder what the old bore wants now? Anything else?"

"No," replied Thursday5, disappointed that I didn't share her unbridled enthusiasm over an appearance at the CofG. I couldn't. I'd been there so many times I just saw it as part of my duties, nothing more.

I opened my desk drawer to take out a sheet of letterhead and noticed Thursday5's assessment letter where I'd put it the night before. I thought for a moment and decided to give her one more chance. I left it where it was, pulled out a sheet of paper and wrote a letter to Wing Commander Scampton-Tappett, telling him to get out of *Bananas for Edward*, since Landen wasn't currently working on it, and move instead to *The Mews of Doom*, which he was. I folded up the letter, placed it in an envelope and told Thursday5 to deliver it to Scampton-Tappett in person. I could have asked her to send it by courier, but twenty minutes' peace and quiet had a great deal of appeal to it. Thursday5 nodded happily and vanished.

I had just leaned back in my chair and was thinking about Felix8, the possible End of Time and the *Austen Rover* when a hearty bellow of "Stand to!" indicated the imminence of

Bradshaw's daily Jurisdiction briefing. I dutifully stood up and joined the other agents who had gathered in the center of the room.

After the usual apologies for absence, Bradshaw climbed on to a table, tinkled a small bell and said, "Jurisdiction meeting number 43370 is now in session. But before all that we are to welcome a new agent to the fold: Colonel William Dobbin!"

We all applauded as Colonel Dobbin gave a polite bow and remarked in a shy yet resolute manner that he would do his utmost to further the good work of Jurisdiction.

"Jolly good," intoned Bradshaw, eager to get on. "Item One: An active cell of bowdlerizers has been at work again, this time in Philip Larkin and 'This Be the Verse.' We've found several editions with the first line altered to read 'They tuck you up, your mum and dad,' which is a gross distortion of the original intent. Who wants to have a go at this?"

"I will," I said.

"No. What about you, King Pellinore?"

"Yes-yes what-what hey-hey!" said the white-whiskered knight in grubby armor.

"You've had experience dealing with bowdlerizers in Larkin before--cracking the group that altered the first line of 'Love Again' to read: 'Love again: thanking her at ten past three' was great stuff--fancy tackling them again?"

"What-what to go a mollocking for the bowlders?" replied Pellinore happily. "'Twill be achieved happily and in half the time."

"Anyone want to go with him?"

"I'll go." I said.

"Anyone else?"

The Red Queen put up her hand.

"Item Two: The Two Hundred Eighty-seventh Annual Book-World Conference is due in six months' time, and the Council of Genres has insisted we need to have a security review after last year's...problems."

There was a muttering from the assembled agents. BookCon was the sort of event that was too large and too varied to keep all factions happy, and the previous year's decision to lift the restriction on Abstract Concepts attending as delegates opened

the floodgates to a multitude of Literary Theories and Grammatical Conventions who spent most of the time pontificating loftily and causing trouble in the bar, where fights broke out at the drop of a participle. When Poststructuralism got into a fight with Classicism, they were all banned, something that upset the Subjunctives no end, who complained bitterly that if *they* had been fighting, they would have won.

"Are the Abstracts allowed to attend this year?" asked Lady Cavendish.

"I'm afraid so," replied Bradshaw. "Not to invite them would be seen as discriminatory. Volunteers?"

Six of us put up our hands, and Bradshaw diligently scribbled down our names.

"Top-notch," he said at last. "The first meeting will be next week. Now, Item Three, and this one is something of a corker: We've got a Major Narrative Flexation brewing in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*."

"Is it the Watson bullet-wound problem again?" asked Mr. Fainset.

"No, it's more serious than that. Sherlock Holmes...*has been murdered!*"

There was a spontaneous cry of shock and outrage from the assembled agents. The Holmes series was a perennial favorite and thus of particular concern--textual anomalies in unread or unpopular books were always lower priority, or ignored altogether. Bradshaw handed a stack of papers to Lady Cavendish, who distributed them.

"It's in 'The Final Problem.' You can read it yourself, but essentially Sherlock travels to Switzerland to deal with Professor Moriarty. After the usual Holmesian escapades, Watson follows Sherlock to the Reichenbach Falls, where he discovers that Holmes has apparently fallen to his death--and the book ends twenty-nine pages before it was meant to."

There was a shocked silence as everyone took this in. We hadn't had a textual anomaly of this size since Lucy Pevensie refused to get into the wardrobe at the beginning of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

"But *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* was the fourth volume,"

observed Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle, looking up from her ironing. "With Sherlock dead at the Reichenbach, it would render the remaining five volumes of stories narratively unsustainable."

"Partly right," replied Bradshaw. "*The Hound of the Baskervilles* was written after *Memoirs* but is set earlier--I think we can keep hold of that one. But yes, the remaining four in the series will start to spontaneously unravel unless we do something about it. And we will, I assure you--erasure is not an option."

This was not as easy as it sounded despite Bradshaw's rhetoric, and we all knew it. The entire Sherlock Holmes series was closed books, unavailable to enter until someone had actually booksplored his or her way in--and the Holmes canon had continuously resisted exploration. Gomez was the first Jurisfiction booksplorer to try by way of Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, but he mistakenly became involved in the narrative and was shot dead by Lord Roxton. Harris Tweed tried it next and was nearly trampled by a herd of angry *Stegosauri*.

"I want everyone in on this problem. The Cat Formerly Known as Cheshire will be keeping a careful eye on the narrative corruption of the series up at Text Grand Central, and I want Beatrice, Benedict, Zhark and Tiggy-Winkle to try to find a way of using the other books in the Conan Doyle oeuvre--I suggest the Professor Challenger stories. Fainset and Foyle, I want you to explore the possibility of *communication* with anyone inside the Holmes series--they may not even know they have a problem."

"They're well outside the footnoterphone network," said Mr. Fainset. "Any suggestions?"

"I'm relying on Foyle's ingenuity. If anyone sees Hamlet or Peter and Jane before I do, send them immediately to me. Any questions?"

"What do you want me to do?" I asked, wondering why I had been left out of everything important so far.

"I'll speak to you later. Okay, that's it. Good luck, and...let's be *careful* out there."

The collected agents instantly started chattering. We hadn't had anything like this for years, which made it seem even



more stupid that Bradshaw wasn't including me on the assignment. I caught up with him as he sat at his desk.

"What's going on?" I asked. "You need me on this."

"Hello, my dear! Not like you to nearly miss a session--problems in the Outland?"

"I was up at Goliath."

He raised an eyebrow. "How do things look?"

I explained at length what I had seen, ending with the observation that it wasn't likely they'd perfect a transfictional machine anytime soon, if at all--but we needed to keep our eyes on them.

Bradshaw nodded sagely, and I reiterated my feeling that I was being somehow "left out" of the Holmes inquiry.

"How's Friday? Still a bed slug?"

"Yes--but nothing I can't handle."

"Have you told Landen about us yet?"

"I'm building up to it. Bradshaw, you're flanneling--*why aren't I on the Holmes case?*"

He gestured for me to sit and lowered his voice. "I had a call from Senator Jobsworth this morning. He's keen to reinstate a certain cadet that we recently...had to let go."

I knew the cadet he was referring to. There was a sound reason for her rejection--she'd been euphemistically entitled "unsuitable." Not in the way that my nice-but-a-bit-dopey cadet was unsuitable, but unsuitable as in obnoxious. She'd gone through five tutors in as many days. Even Emperor Zhark said that he'd preferred to be eaten alive by the Snurrg of Epsilon-7 than spend another five minutes in her company.

"Why has Jobsworth requested her? There are at least ten we rejected that are six times better."

"Because we're light on agents in contemporary fiction, and the CofG thinks she checks all the genre boxes."

"He's wrong, of course," I said quite matter-of-factly, but people like Jobsworth are politicians and have a different set of rules. "I can see his point, though. The question is, what are you going to do about it? She's exhausted all the agents licensed to take apprentices."

Bradshaw said nothing and stared at me. In an instant I understood.

"Oh, no," I said, "not me. Not in a thousand years. Besides, I've already got a cadet on assessment."

"Then get rid of her. You told me yourself that her timidity would get her killed."

"It will--but I feel kind of responsible. Besides, I've already got a full caseload. The Mrs. Danvers that went berserk in *The God of Small Things* still needs investigating, the Minotaur tried to kill me--not to mention about thirty or so cold cases, some of which are potentially solvable--especially the Drood case. I think it's possible Dickens was...*murdered*."

"In the Outland? And for what reason?"

"To silence Edwin Drood--or someone else in the book."

I *wasn't* sure about this, of course, and any evidence was already over a hundred years old, but I would do anything not to get stuck with this apprentice. Sadly, Bradshaw wasn't taking no for an answer or softening to my pleas.

"Don't make me order you, old girl. It will embarrass us both. Besides, if you fail her--as I'm sure you shall--then we really *have* run out of tutors, and I can tell Jobsworth we did everything in our power."

I groaned. "How about I take her next week? That way I can come to grips with the Holmes death thing."

"Senator Jobsworth was *most* insistent," added Bradshaw. "He's been on the footnoterphone three times this morning already."

I knew what he meant. When Jobsworth got his teeth into something, he rarely let go. The relationship between us was decidedly chilly, and we were at best only cordial. The crazy thing was, we both wanted the best for the BookWorld--we just had different methods of trying to achieve it.

"Very well," I said finally. "I'll give her a day--or a morning, if she lasts that."

"Good lass!" exclaimed Bradshaw happily. "Appreciate a woman who knows when she's being coerced. I'll get her to meet you outside Norland."

"Is that all?" I asked somewhat crossly.

"No. It seems someone's made an ass of themselves over at Resource Management regarding maintenance schedules, and we've got a--Well, see for yourself."

He handed me a report, and I flicked through the pages with a rising sense of despair. It was always the same. Someone at admin screws up and we have to pick up the pieces.

"The Piano Squad has been on the go for eight hours straight," he added, "so I'd like you to step in and relieve them for a rest period. Take your cadets with you. Should be a useful training session."

My heart sank.

"I've got to appear at the CofG later this afternoon," I explained, "and if I've a second cadet to nursemaid--"

"I'll make it up to you," interrupted Bradshaw. "It'll be a doddle--a walk in the park. How much trouble can anyone get into with pianos?"

TransGenre Taxis was one of several BookWorld taxi companies and the only firm that could boast an accident rate that was vaguely acceptable. Taxis were a good way to get around the BookWorld if you weren't that good at jumping or had lots of luggage, but in comparison to the instantaneous bookjump they were like snails. They didn't so much jump as creep. Getting all the way across the BookWorld--from Philosophy to Poetry, for instance--could take as long as an hour.

"You're kidding me?" I said into my mobilefootnoterphone twenty minutes later. I was outside the main entrance to Norland Park as the sun began its downward slope from midday heat into the rare beauty of an Austen literary afternoon. The warm rural environment was rich with the sounds of the plow horse's bridles jingling in the fields, the bees buzzing merrily in the hedgerows and young ladies atwitter with gossip regarding the genteel ensnarement of monied husbands.

"Well," I added crossly, "just send it as soon as you can."

I snapped the phone shut.

"Problems?" asked Thursday5, who had been making daisy chains while sitting cross-legged on the warm grass.

"Those twits at TransGenre Taxis," I replied. "More excuses. They claim there are long backups due to a traffic accident inside *The Great Gatsby* and our cab will be at least an hour."

"Can't we just jump straight to wherever it is we're going?" She stopped and thought for a moment. "Where *are* we going?"

"The Piano Squad. But we're waiting for someone."

"Who?"

"We're waiting," I said, unsure of how to break the news, "for a cadet who is under reappraisal."

"*Another* cadet?" repeated Thursday5, who seemed vaguely

miffed at first but soon recovered. "If only I'd known, I could have baked a welcome cake."

"I don't think she's a cake sort of person," I murmured, as a noise like the scrunching of cellophane heralded her arrival. She appeared looking somewhat out of breath, and we all three stared at one another for some moments in silence until both cadets said at precisely the same time:

"What's *she* doing here?"

"Listen," I said to them both, "I know this is an awkward situation--and a little weird, too, if you want to know my opinion, and if either of you doesn't like it, you can just go straight back to your respective books."

My latest apprentice glared at me, then at Thursday5, then at me again before saying with a forced smile, "In that case I should probably introduce myself and say what an *incredible* honor it is to be apprenticed to the *great* Thursday Next."

"Why don't you save your breath--and your sarcasm?" I retorted. I liked a challenge, but this was probably one or two challenges too far. For this, of course, was the *other* Thursday Next, the one from the first four books in the series--the violent ones full of death and gratuitous sex.

"Well, whoop-de-do," she said quietly, looking at us both. "If this is how the day starts, it can only get better."

Thursday5 and I stared at the newcomer with a curious kind of fascination. Unlike Thursday5, who always dressed in fair-trade cotton and woollens, this Thursday preferred aggressive black leather. Leather trousers, jacket and a greatcoat that swept to the floor. So much, in fact, that she squeaked when she walked. Her hair was the same length as ours but was pulled back into a ponytail more sharply, and her eyes were hidden by small dark glasses. Attached to her belt were two automatic pistols with the butts facing in so she could cross-draw--heaven knows why. Aside from this and despite being featured in books that were set between 1985 and 1988, she looked exactly as I did--even to the flecks of gray hair that I *still* pretended I didn't care about.

But she wasn't me. She was less like me, in fact, than the talking-to-flowers version, if such a thing was possible. I'd read the books and although she *attempted* to do things for the right

reason, her methods could best be described as dubious and her motivations suspect. Thursday5 was mostly thought with very little action; Thursday1-4 was mostly action with very little thought. The series had sacrificed characterization for plot, and humor for action and pace. All atmosphere had evaporated, and the books were a parade of violent set pieces interspersed with romantic interludes, and when I say "romantic," I'm stretching the term. Most famous was her torrid affair with Edward Rochester and the stand-up catfight with Jane Eyre. I had thought it couldn't get any worse until Mrs. Fairfax turned out to be a ninja assassin and Bertha Rochester was abducted by aliens. And all that was just in the first book. It got more far-fetched after that. By book four it felt as though the first draft had been torn apart by wolves and then stuck back together at random before publication.

I took a deep breath, inwardly cursed Commander Bradshaw and said, "Thursday...meet Thursday."

"Hello!" said Thursday5 brightly, offering a hand in reconciliation. "So pleased to meet you, and happy birthday--for yesterday."

Thursday looked at Thursday's outstretched hand and raised an eyebrow.

"I've had the misfortune to read *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco*," she said in an unfriendly tone. "If you took the 'Samuel Pepys' out of the title, it would be a lot more honest. A bigger crock of shit I've yet to find. I kept on waiting for the shoot-outs to begin, and there weren't any--just a load of hugging, vitamins and people saying they love one another."

"There's nothing wrong with hugging," retorted Thursday5 defensively. "Perhaps if you were to try...?"

She put out her arms but was met with the curt response, "Lay your muesli-smelling paws on me and I'll break your nose."

"Well!" said Thursday5 in an indignant huff. "I'm almost sorry I wished you a happy birthday--and I'm *very* glad I didn't bake you a cake."

"I'm devastated."

"Listen," I said before this descended into blows, "I'm not going to *ask* you to get along, I'm *telling* you to get along."

Okay?"

Thursday1-4 gave a lackadaisical shrug.

"Right," I began, addressing Thursday1-4. "There are three simple rules if you want to train with me. Rule One: You do exactly as I tell you. Rule Two: You speak when you're spoken to. Rule Three: I shall call you 'Thursday1-4' or 'Thur1-4' or Onesday or...anything I want, really. You will call me 'ma'am.' If I summon you, you come running. Rule Four: You give me any crap and you're history."

"I thought you said there were only three rules."

"I make it up as I go along. Do you have any problem with that?"

"I suppose not."

"Good. Let's start at the beginning. How much classroom theory have you done?"

"Six weeks. Took my finals last Tuesday and came in third."

"That's not bad."

"How many in the class?" asked Thursday5, who was still smarting over the possibility that her hands smelled of muesli, let alone the threat of a broken nose.

Thursday1-4 glared at her and mumbled, "Three, and two percent above the minimum pass mark, before you ask. But I scored ninety-nine percent on the range. Pistols, rifle, machine gun, grenade launcher--you name it."

This was the main reason I didn't like the Thursday Next series--far, far too many guns and a body count that would be the envy of the cinematic Rambo. Thursday1-4 unholstered an aggressive-looking automatic and showed it to us both.

"Glock nine-millimeter," she said proudly. "Sixteen in the clip and one up the spout. *Severe* stopping power. I carry two to make quite sure."

"Only two?" I murmured sarcastically.

"No, since you're asking." She lifted up the back of her leather greatcoat to show me a large, shiny revolver stuffed down the back of her trousers.

"What do you carry?" she asked. "Beretta? Browning? Walther?"

"None," I said. "Charge into a room with a gun and someone ends up dead."

"Isn't that how it's supposed to work?"

"In *your* books, perhaps. If someone dies during an assignment, then the assignment was a failure. No exceptions."

"Diplomacy and using your head," put in Thursday5 bravely, "are better than waving a gun around."

"And what would you know about it, your supreme bogusness?"

"You don't have to insult me *all* the time," she replied, visibly upset. "And besides, I'm not sure 'bogusness' is a word."

"Well, listen here, veggieburger," said the leather-clad Thursday in a sneering tone of voice, "I *do* have to insult you all the time. Firstly because it's fun, and secondly because...No, I don't need a second reason."

"Jeez," I said, shaking my head sadly as all patience left me. "You're still revolting, aren't you?"

"Revolting?" she retorted. "Perhaps. But since I'm mostly you, I guess you're partly to blame, right?"

"Get this straight in your head," I said, moving closer. "The only thing you share with me is a name and a face. You can have a go at *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco* all you want, but at least it's not a constant orgy of comic-book violence and abundant, meaningless sex."

"Oh, I'm sorry--is that a criticism? Or just wishful thinking on your part? Because I was having a look at the figures the other day and I'm still selling strongly." She turned to the *Pepys* Thursday. "How many books have *you* sold in the past five years?"

It was a pointed yet strictly rhetorical remark. *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco* had been remaindered less than six months after publication.

"You don't hate *me*," said Thursday1-4 to Thursday5. "You secretly want to be like me. If you want to hate anyone, hate *her*." She directed this comment at me.

"Why would I?" asked Thursday5, close to tears.

With a creaking of leather, Thursday1-4 moved closer to her and said in a low voice, "Because she insisted that your book was full of touchy-feely family values--pet dodo, gardening, a husband, two lovely kids--"

"Three."



"What ever. They asked me to do book five, but I took one look at the script and told them to stick it." She pointed a gloved finger at me. "Her personal vanity condemned you to the slow death of being unread, unreviewed, undiscussed and out of print. The real Thursday is as single-minded as I am--even to the ultimate vanity of rewriting herself into the guise of little Miss Granola Tree-Hugger here--with no other reason than to protect her own fragile vanity, Z-class celebrity status and inconsequential public opinion. She and I are more alike than she thinks."

She stopped talking with a triumphant smile on her face. The other Thursday looked at me with tears in her eyes, and I was feeling hotly indignant myself, mostly because what she was saying was *true*. The only reason I'd taken on Thursday5 at all was that I felt responsible. Not just because she *was* an insufferable drip, but because she was an unread one as well.

"Oh, no!" said Thursday5, giving out a heavy sob. "Now all my chakras are *completely* unaligned--can I have the rest of the day off?"

"Good idea," said Thursday1-4 with an unpleasant chuckle. "Why not go and meditate? After all, it's better than doing nothing the whole day."

Thursday gave another cry of indignation, I told her she could leave, and she did so with a faint *pop*.

"Listen," I said, also lowering my voice, "you can do your character-assassination crap all day if you want, but that's not important. What *is* important is that the CofG in all its misguided wisdom seems to think you might be good enough for Jurisfiction. Five previous tutors don't agree. *I* don't agree. I think you're a viper. But it's not up to me. It's up to you. For you to join Jurisfiction, you need to learn how to survive in the hostile and dynamic textual environment. You and I are going to spend the next few days together whether I like it or not, and since my conduct review of you is the only thing that counts toward your final acceptance at Jurisfiction, you need to try *really* hard not to piss me off."

"Ahh!" she murmured patronizingly. "She does speeches. Listen, sister, you may be a big cheese at Jurisfiction *today*, but if I were you, I'd show a keen sense of diplomacy. I'll have

the Bellman's job one day--and I'll be looking out only for my friends. Now, are you going to be a friend or not?"

"Good Lord," I said in a quiet voice, "the Cheshire Cat was right--you really are *completely* obnoxious. Is that your final word?"

"It is."

"Then you can piss off back to your boxed set right now. Give me your badge."

She seemed perturbed for an instant. Her all-consuming arrogance had not even *once* entertained the notion she might actually be fired. But, true to form, instead of even attempting conciliation, she went into more threats:

"The CofG cadet selection subcommittee won't be happy."

"Screw *them*. Your badge?"

She stared at me with a sense of rising confusion. "You'd fire...me?"

"Just have. Give me your badge or I'll place you under arrest."

She took the Jurisdiction Cadet's shield from her pocket and slapped it into my open palm. Without that or a travel permit, she was technically a PageRunner and could be erased on sight.

"Good day," I said. "I won't say it's been a plea sure, because it hasn't."

And I walked away, pulling out my mobilefootnoterphone as I did so.

"Hello, Bradshaw? I've just fired Thursday1-4. I'm amazed anyone lasted more than ten minutes with her--I didn't."

1

"Yes, already. Tell Jobsworth we did our best."

2

"Too bad. I'll take the flak for it. This one's a serious piece of--"

"Wait, wait!" yelled Thursday, holding her head in a massive display of self-control. "That was my last chance, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

She massaged her temples. "I can do this. I'm sor--I'm sor--*Sooooor*--"

"You can say it."

"I can't."

"Try."

She screwed up her face and forced the word out. "I'm...sorry. I'll be your apprentice. Jurisdiction has need of people like me, and I am willing to run the gauntlet of your overbearing mediocrity in order to achieve that."

I stared at her for a moment. "Vague apology accepted."

I moved away so Thursday1-4 couldn't hear me and spoke into my mobilefootnoterphone again.

"Bradshaw, how badly do we need to suck up to Jobsworth right now?"

3

I told Bradshaw to rely on me. He thanked me profusely, wished me well and rang off. I snapped the phone shut and placed it back in my bag.

"Right," I said, tossing Thursday1-4's badge back at her. "For your first assignment, you are to get Thursday5 back here, chakras realigned or not, and apologize to her."

Thursday1-4 stared at me for a moment, then dialed her own cell phone. I turned away and walked down the gravel drive, trying to relax. What a start.

I sat on an ornamental lion at the foot of the entrance steps and watched from a distance as Thursday5 reappeared and, after the briefest of altercations, they shook hands. There was a pause and then a few raised voices until finally, incredibly, and with Thursday1-4 as stiff as a poker, she allowed herself to be hugged. I smiled to myself, got up and walked back to where the pair of them were standing, Thursday5 looking optimistically positive and Thursday1-4 brooding stonily.

"Have you two sorted yourselves out?"

They both nodded.

"Good," I said, consulting my watch. "We've got a few hours before we attend the Council of Genres' policy-directive meeting, but before that--"

"We are attending the CofG meeting?" asked Thursday5 with eyes like saucers.

"Yes, but only in the sort of 'we' that means you stand at the back and say nothing."

"Wow! What will they be discussing?"

"BookWorld policy. Such as whether we should be supplying characters to video games to give them added depth. It's

particularly relevant, as publishing these days doesn't necessarily restrict books to being just books. It's said that Harry Potter will make a rare appearance. Now, we've got to--"

"Will we really meet Harry Potter?" she asked in a soft whisper, her eyes going all dewy at the mention of the young wizard. Thursday1-4 looked to heaven and stood, arms crossed, waiting for us to get on with the day's work.

"It depends," I sighed. "If you pay attention or not. Now for this afternoon's assignment: relieving the staff who are dealing with the BookWorld's ongoing piano problem. And for that we need to go to Text Grand Central."

## The Piano Problem

The piano was thought to have been invented by Bartolomeo Cristofori in the early eighteenth century and was originally called the *gravicembalo col piano e forte*, which was fortunately reduced to *pianoforte*, then more simply to *piano*. Composed of 550 pounds of iron, wood, strings and felt, the eighty-eight-key instrument is capable of the subtlest of melodies, yet stored up in the tensioned strings is the destructive power of a subcompact moving at twenty miles per hour.

If Jurisdiction was the policing agency inside books and the Council of Genres was the political arm, Text Grand Central was the bureaucracy that bridged the two. Right up until the Ultra-word™ debacle, TGC had remained unimpeachably honest, but after that, the Council of Genres--on my advice--took the harsh but only possible course of action to ensure that Text Grand Central would be too inefficient and unimaginative to pose a threat. They appointed a committee to run it.

As we walked onto one of the main Storycode Engine floors, I heard Thursday5 gasp. The proportions of the room were more in keeping with a factory that made Very Large Things, and the stone walls, vaulted ceiling and flickering gas lamps betrayed the room's provenance as something borrowed from an unpublished Gothic Horror novel. Laid in serried ranks across the echoing vastness of the space were hundreds of Storycode Engines, each one the size of a bus and built of shiny brass, mahogany and cast iron. A convoluted mass of pipes, valves and gauges, they looked like a cross between an espresso machine, a ship's engine and a euphonium on acid. They were so large there was a catwalk running around the upper section for easy maintenance, with a cast-iron spiral staircase at one end for access.

"These are Imaginotransference Storycode Engines. The most

important piece of technology we possess. Remember the pipe leading out of core containment in *Pinocchio*?"

Thursday5 nodded.

"The throughput is radiated across the intragenre Nothing and ends up here, where they are then transmitted into the reader's imagination."

I knew why it worked but not *how*. Indeed, I was suspicious that perhaps there wasn't an explanation at all--or indeed any need for one. It was something we called an "abstract narrative imperative": They work solely because it's expedient that they do. The BookWorld is like that. Full of wholly improbable plot devices that are there to help grease the storytelling cogs.

I paused so they could both watch the proceedings for a moment. Thursday5 made no secret of her fascination, but Thursday1-4 stifled a faux yawn. Despite this, she still looked around. It was hard not to be impressed--the machines stretched off into the hazy distance almost as far as you could see. Technicians scurried like ants over the whirring machinery checking dials, oiling, venting off steam and filling out reports on clipboards. Others moved between machines with trolleys full of papers to be filed, and the air was full of the smell of hot oil and steam. Above our heads a series of clanking shafts and flapping leather belts brought power to the engines, and the combined clatter and hum in the vast chamber sounded like a cascading waterfall.

"Five hundred machines on each floor!" I shouted above the tumult. "With each one capable of handling up to fifty thousand concurrent readings. The ones in the blue overalls are the storycode technicians, known affectionately as 'word monkeys.' They keep the engines running smoothly, clean out the dialogue injectors and make sure there isn't a buildup of irony on the compressors. The man dressed in the white lab coat is the 'text collector.' There is a reader echo that pings back to the engine to throughput the next word, so we can use that to check if the book is running true to the author's original wishes. Any variance is termed a 'textual anomaly' and is caught in the waste gate of the echo skimmers, which are those large copper things on the top."

"This is all *really* fascinating technological stuff," observed Thursday1-4 drily, "but I'm waiting to see how it relates to pianos."

"It doesn't, O sarcastic one. It's called education."

"Pointless exposition, if you ask me."

"She's not asking you," retorted Thursday5.

"Exactly," I replied, "and some people enjoy the techie stuff. Follow me."

I opened an arched oak door that led off the engine floor and into the administrative section of Text Grand Central, a labyrinth of stone corridors lit by flaming torches affixed to the walls. It was insufferably gloomy but economical--part of the unfinished Gothic Horror novel from which all of TGC was fashioned. As soon as the door closed, the noise from the main engine floor ceased abruptly.

"I was just trying to explain," I said, "how we find out about narrative flexations. Most of the time, the anomalies are just misreads and lazy readers getting the wrong end of the stick, but we have to check everything, just in case."

"I can get this on the Text Grand Central tour for twenty shillings and with better company," said Thursday1-4, looking pointedly at Thursday5.

"*I'm* interested, ma'am."

"Creep."

"Slut."

"What did you call me?"

"Hey!" I shouted. "*Cut it out!*"

"She started it," said Thursday1-4.

"I don't care who started it. You'll *both* be fired if you carry on like this."

They fell silent, and we walked along the echoing corridors, past endless oak doors, all relating to some textual activity such as word meanings, idea licensing and grammasite control.

"The problem with pianos," I began, "is that there aren't enough to go around. Lots of people in the BookWorld play them, they frequently appear in the narrative, and they're often used as plot devices. Yet for an unfathomable reason that no one can fully explain, there are only fifteen to cover

the entire BookWorld."

"Fifteen?" snorted Thursday1-4, who was lagging behind in a petulant manner. "How do they manage that, then?"

"With a lot of difficulty. Have a look."

I opened a door off the corridor. The room was much like a psychiatrist's office, full of bookshelves and with diplomas on the wall. There were two chairs, a desk and a couch. Two men were sitting in the chairs: A beard and pipe identified the first man immediately as a psychiatrist, and the second, who seemed desperately nervous, was obviously the patient.

"So, Mr. Patient," began the psychiatrist, "what can I do for you?"

"Well, Doc," muttered the patient unhappily, "I keep on thinking I'm a dog."

"I see. And how long has this been going on?"

"Since I was a puppy."

"Excuse me," I interrupted, "I'm looking for the Piano Squad."

"This is Very Old Jokes," explained the psychiatrist apologetically. "Pianos are down the corridor, first on the left."

"Sorry," I muttered somewhat sheepishly, and quietly closed the door. "I keep on doing that," I murmured. "They should really label these doors better."

We walked along the corridor, found the correct door and opened it to reveal a room about fifty feet square. The walls were roughly plastered, and the vaulted stone ceiling was supported in the center of the room by a sturdy pillar. Set into the wall to our right was an aperture the size of a single garage, painted bright white and illuminated from within by several hundred lightbulbs. As we watched, there was a faint buzz, a flicker, and an ornate cabinet piano suddenly appeared in the aperture. Almost instantly a workman dressed in brown overalls and with a flat cap moved forward to wheel it out on well-oiled castors. Facing the bright white opening was a control desk that looked like a recording studio's mixing console, and behind this were two men of youthful countenance, dressed in linen suits. They were wearing headsets and had the harried look of people under great pressure.

"Upright rosewood returned from *Sons and Lovers*,"



whispered the one who was standing. "Stand by to send the Goetzmann into *Villette*."

"Check!" shouted the other man as he adjusted the knobs and sliders on the console. The workman pushed a Goetzmann grand into the empty aperture, stepped back, called "Clear," and with another buzz, the piano vanished.

They looked at us as soon as we entered, and I nodded a greeting. They nodded one back and returned to their work.

"Observe," I said to the Thursdays, pointing to a large indicator panel on the wall behind the men. The fifteen pianos were listed down the left-hand side, and in columns next to them were indicator lights and illuminated panels that explained what was happening to each. The uppermost piano on the list we noted was a "generic" grand and was currently inside *Bleak House*. It would be available in a few minutes and was next due to appear in *Mill on the Floss*, where it would stay for a number of scenes until departing for *Heart of Darkness*. While we watched, the indicator boards clicked the various changes as the two operators expertly moved the pianos back and forth across fiction. Below the indicator boards were several other desks, a watercooler and a kitchenette and coffee bar. There were a few desultory potted plants kicking around, but aside from several rusty filing cabinets, there was not much else in the room.

"Fifteen pianos is usually ample," I explained, "and when all pianos are available for use, the Piano Squad just trots along merrily to a set timetable. There are a few changes here and there when a new book requires a piano, but it generally works--eightysix percent of pianos appear in nineteenth-and early-twentieth-century literature."

I pointed to the indicator board.

"But if you notice, eight pianos are 'status unavailable,' which means that they have been pulled out of frontline service for maintenance." I waved the report Bradshaw had handed me. "There was an administrative mix-up; we usually have one piano offline at a time, but some clot had them all refitted at once to save costs."

The Thursdays looked at the two operators again, and as we watched, the upright piano made of rosewood and with inlaid

brass was moved from *Sons and Lovers* to *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and then on to *The Turn of the Screw*.

"That's right," I said, "Charles and Roger are having to spread seven pianos around the entire canon of English fiction. Hang on, it looks as though we're coming to a break."

They did indeed seem to be about to stop work for a few minutes. The two operators relaxed, stopped what they were doing, removed their headsets and stretched.

"Hello, Thursday," said the younger of the two in a quiet whisper. "Brought your family in to work?"

"Not a chance," I laughed. "Jurisfiction Cadets Thursday5 and Thursday1-4, meet Charles and Roger of the Piano Squad."

"Hello!" yelled Roger, who appeared not to be able to converse at anything less than a shout. "Come up and have a look-see!"

The Thursdays went to join Roger at the console, Thursday5 because she was genuinely interested and Thursday1-4 because Roger was actually quite attractive.

"Just how many piano mentions are there in fiction?" asked Thursday5.

"Thousands," he replied, "but in varying degrees. Much of nineteenth-century literature--the Brontes, Hardy and Dickens in particular--is literally *awash* with pianos, but they're rarely played. Those are the easy ones to deal with. Our pianos one to seven are nonfunctioning and are for description only. They are simply on an automatic circuit of the BookWorld, appearing momentarily in the text before flashing off to appear elsewhere." He turned to the indicator board. "If you look at the panel, our trusty old P-6 Broadwood upright is currently on page three hundred and thirty-nine of *The Lost World*, where it occupies a space near the standard lamp in the Pottses' villa in Streatham. In a few moments, it will jump automatically to the subbasement on page ninety-one of *Howards End*, where it will sit beneath a Maud Goodman painting. A moment later it will jump off to page one hundred and sixty-one of *Huckleberry Finn* and the Grangerford parlor."

"However," added Charles in a whisper, "Eliot, Austen and Thackeray are not only knee-deep in pianos, but working ones which in many instances are the linchpin of a scene. And *those*

are the ones we have to be most careful about regarding supply and demand. Amelia Sedley's piano in *Vanity Fair* is sold at auction and repurchased by Dobbin to be given to her as a gift, and the singing and accompaniment within Austen do much to add to the general atmosphere."

Thursday5 nodded enthusiastically, and Thursday1-4, for the first time that day, actually expressed a vague interest and asked a question: "Can't someone just make some more pianos?"

"There is a measure of economy that runs throughout the BookWorld," he replied. "We count ourselves lucky--pianos are positively *bountiful* compared to the number of real dusty gray and wrinkly elephants."

"How many of those are there?"

"One. If anyone needs a herd, the Pachyderm Supply Division has to make do with cardboard cutouts and a lot of off-page trumpeting."

The Thursdays mused upon this for a moment, as Charles and Roger donned their jackets and prepared to take a few hours off while I took over. I'd done it before, so it wasn't a problem.

"Everything's pretty much set on automatic," explained Charles as they headed out the door, "but there are a few manual piano movements you'll need to do--there's a list on the console. We'll be back in two hours to take care of the whole *Jude the Obscure* letter-in-the-piano plot-device nonsense and to somehow juggle the requirements of a usable piano in *Three Men in a Boat* with the destruction of a Beulhoff grand in *Decline and Fall*."

"Sooner you than me," I said. "Enjoy your break."

They assured me that they would and departed with the man in overalls, whose name, we learned, was Ken.

"Right," I said, sitting down and putting my feet up on the console. "Get the coffee on, Thursday."

Neither of them budged an inch.

"She gave *you* an order," said Thursday1-4. "And I take mine black and strong."

"Humph!" muttered Thursday5, but she went off to put the kettle on nonetheless.

Thursday1-4 took off her greatcoat, hung it on a peg and sat down in one of the other chairs.

"So...we just sit here and watch pianos move around the BookWorld?" she asked in a somewhat sneering tone of voice. Mind you, she usually spoke like that, so it was nothing unusual.

"That's *exactly* what we do. Much of Jurisfiction's work is like this. Boring but essential. Without an uninterrupted supply of pianos, much essential atmosphere would be lost. Can you imagine *The Woman in White* without Laura's playing?"

Thursday1-4 looked blank.

"You don't know what I'm talking about, do you?"

"The classics are too slow for me," she replied, idly taking one of her automatics from its holster and removing the clip to stare at the shiny rounds. "Not enough action. I'm more into David Webb."

"You've read Robert Ludlum?" I asked in surprise. Most bookpeople didn't read. It was too much like a busman's holiday.

"Nope. It's Dave I like, *especially* when he's Jason Bourne. Knows how to show a lady a good time and can pop a head shot from a thousand yards."

"Is there anyone in fiction you *haven't* slept with?"

"I love *The Woman in White*," put in Thursday5, who had returned with a tray of coffees--but with a glass of water for herself, I noticed. "All that Mozart to express her love for Hartright--dreamy!"

I took my coffee, and we watched the lights flicker on the console as a nonfunctioning Bosendorfer was moved from *Our Mutual Friend* to *Persuasion*, where it jumped rapidly between the twelve different scenes in which it was mentioned before vanishing off into *Wives and Daughters*.

"I think atmosphere in novels is overrated," said Thursday1-4, taking a sip of coffee before she added patronizingly, "Good coffee, Thursday--jolly well done."

"That's put my mind at rest," replied Thursday5 sarcastically, something that Thursday1-4 missed.

"Are there any cookies?" I asked.

"Yes," echoed Thursday1-4, "are there any?"

Thursday5 huffed, got up, found some Jaffa cakes and placed them on the console in front of me, glaring at Thursday1-4 as she did so.

"Don't underestimate atmosphere," I said slowly, helping myself to a Jaffa cake. "The four opposing forces in any novel are atmosphere, plot, character and pace. But they don't have to be in equilibrium. You can have a book without any plot or pace at all, but it has to make up for it in character and a bit of atmosphere--like *The Old Man and the Sea*. Most thrillers are plot and pace and nothing else, such as *Where Eagles Dare*. But it doesn't matter; each to a reader's own--"

I stopped talking, because a warning light was flashing on the console in front of us.

"Hmm," I murmured as I leaned closer, "they're overrunning in *The Dubliners*, and *Ulysses* needs an upright piano for Mr. Dedalus to comment upon at the Ormond Hotel in less than a minute's time."

"Isn't there a spare piano at Norland Park?" asked Thursday5.

"No--Marianne took it with her to Devon, and it's currently one of those being overhauled."

I scanned the knobs and switches of the console, looking for a spare piano that could be redirected. I eventually found one in *Peter Pan*. It was only referred to in a line of dialogue, so I redirected it to *Ulysses* as quickly as I could. Too quickly, to be honest, and I fumbled the interchange.

"Shit," I muttered under my breath.

"What?"

"Nothing," I replied, knowing full well that no one would notice. I'd placed it in the wrong part of the Ormond Hotel. I didn't have time to worry about this, however, as another warning light was flashing. This was to alert us that the first manual piano movement that Roger and Charles had left us with was approaching. I picked up the handwritten note and read it.

"We've got the Goetzmann grand returning from *Villette*, and it has to be sent with piano stool 87B into Agatha Christie's *They Do It with Mirrors*. Who can see a piano stool anywhere?"

Neither of the Thursdays moved an inch. Thursday5 eventually tapped Thursday1-4 on the arm and said, "Your turn. I did the coffee."

"In that case," replied Thursday1-4 with impeccable twisted logic, "it must have been *my* turn to do the Jaffa cakes."

"I suppose."

"Then, since you very kindly undertook that task on *my* behalf, it's *your* turn to do something again--so find the sodding piano stool and stop bothering me with your bleating."

I laid a hand on Thursday1-4's arm and said, "Find the piano stool, Thursday."

She tutted haughtily in a manner that Friday would have approved of but got up and had a look around the room, eventually finding it near a heap of sheet music, a few music stands and a dusty bassoon.

"Here," she said in a bored tone, lifting the lid to look inside. Just at that moment, there was a buzzing noise, and the Goetzmann grand appeared in the brightly lit aperture in the wall.

"Right on time."

I twiddled a few knobs to set its onward journey, told Thursday1-4 to put the piano stool with it, which she did, and then, with yet another buzz, I sent it on to the great hall of Stonygates inside Agatha Christie's *They Do It with Mirrors*.

"Good," I muttered, crossing that first task off the list. "We've got nothing else for a half hour."

But my troubles weren't nearly over, as Thursday5 had sat in the chair recently vacated by Thursday1-4.

"You're in my seat."

"It's not your seat."

"I sat in it first, so it's mine."

"You can't do dibs on seats, and besides, you don't *own* it."

"Listen," growled Thursday1-4, "do you like doing crochet?"

"Yes, so...?"

"Then perhaps you can imagine how tricky that might be...*with broken fingers*."

Thursday5's lip trembled for a moment. "I'm...I'm...sure we can discuss this like rational adults before resorting to anything so crude as violence."

"Perhaps we could," returned Thursday1-4, "but it's far easier with me telling you how it's going to be. Now, get your tied-dyed butt out of my seat."

"Thursday?" I said.

"I can deal with this," snapped Thursday5 in a rare show of annoyance. "I don't need to be rescued like a child every single time Miss Slagfest here opens her trap!"

"I'm not meddling," I replied. "All I want to know is where Thursday1-4 got that pistol."

"This?" she said, holding up the small black automatic that I'd suddenly noticed she was holding. "It's really cool, isn't it? A Browning twenty-six-caliber standard single-action automatic with slide and grip safety."

"Where did you get it?"

"I found it," she retorted defensively, "so I'm keeping it."

I didn't have time for this.

"Tell me where you found it, or you'll be its next victim."

She paused, then said, "It was...in that piano stool."

"Idiot!" I yelled, getting up and demanding she hand it over, which she did. "That's an essential plot point in *They Do It with Mirrors!* Why can't you just leave things alone?"

"I thought--"

"That's the problem. You don't. Stay here while we sort this out, and don't touch anything. I repeat: Touch *nothing*. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes, of course I understand--what do you think I am, a child?"

I didn't have time to argue, so after telling Thursday5 to follow me closely, I jumped out of the Piano Squad to the Great Library, and from there we made our way into Agatha Christie's *They Do It with Mirrors*.

We arrived at Stonygates in the short length of dimly lit corridor that connected the square lobby with the great hall. We pressed ourselves into the shadows, and I looked inside the hall. It was a large room that oozed Victorian Gothic gloominess, with dark wood and minimal lighting. There were a half dozen or so people chattering, but more important, directly ahead of us was the Goetzmann grand that we had dispatched not two minutes before. And in front of this, the

piano stool to which the weapon had to be returned. I was about to chance my luck and sneak in but had not gotten two paces when a young man came and sat on the piano stool and began to play. I retreated into the shadows and felt Thursday5 grip my arm nervously as the lights flickered and went out, leaving the house in semidarkness. We backed farther into the shadows as a large man with a sulky expression came out of the door and vanished into the gloom, muttering about the fuses. A few minutes later, an elderly woman tottered to the dining room and back to retrieve something, and almost immediately the front door was pushed violently open and a young man strode into the hall in an overdramatic manner. This was followed by an argument, the sound of the study door opening and closing, more muffled shouting and eventually two shots. With the characters in the room thus distracted, I padded softly to the man seated at the piano and tapped him lightly on his shoulder. He looked up with some surprise, and I showed him my Jurisdiction badge. I raised my eyebrows, placed a finger to my lips and gestured him to join the people on the other side of the room. He did as I asked, and once his back was turned, I slipped the small automatic into the piano stool, between a copy of Handel's Largo and Chopin's Preludes.

I quickly and noiselessly retraced my steps to where Thursday5 was waiting for me, and within a few minutes we had returned to the Piano Squad's headquarters.

As we reentered, the squad room was in chaos. Warning lights were flashing, klaxons were going off, and the control console was a mass of flickering indicator lights. I was relieved to see--if such a word could be used in such uproar--that Roger and Charles had both returned and were trying to bring some sort of semblance of order back to the piano-distribution network.

"I need the Thurmer back from *Agnes Grey*!" yelled Roger. "And I'll swap it for a nonworking Streicher--"

"What the hell's going on, Thursday?"

It was Commander Bradshaw, and he didn't look very happy.

"I don't know. When I left everything was fine."

"You *left*?" he echoed incredulously. "You left the piano room



unattended?"

"I left--"

But I stopped myself. I was responsible for any cadet's actions or inactions, irrespective of what they were and where they happened. I'd made a mistake. I should have called Bradshaw to cover for me or to get someone to go into *Mirrors*.

I took a deep breath. "No excuses, sir--I screwed up. I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" repeated Bradshaw, "That's it? You're sorry? I've got a dead Holmes on my hands, one of the Outland's most favorite series is about to unravel, and I really don't need one of your idiot cadets suddenly thinking that she's god of all the pianos."

"What did she do?"

"If you'd been supervising properly, you'd know!"

"Okay, okay," I retorted, seriously beginning to get pissed off, "this one's down to me, and I'll face the music, but I'd like to know what she's done before I wipe the smirk off her face for good."

"She decided," he said slowly and with great restraint, "to do her own thing with piano supply in your absence. Every single piano reference has been deleted from Melville, Scott and Defoe."

"What?" I said, looking around the room and finally catching sight of Thursday1-4 on the other side of the room, where she was standing arms folded and apparently without a care in the world.

"As I said. And we don't have the time or the pianos to replace them. But that's not the worst bit."

"It gets worse?"

"Certainly. For some reason known only to herself, she dropped an upright Broadwood straight into Miss Bates's drawing room inside Austen's *Emma*."

"Have they noticed?"

"Pianos aren't generally the sort of thing one can miss. As soon as it arrived, speculation began on where it might have come from. Miss Bates agrees with Mrs. Cole that it's from Colonel Campbell, but Emma thinks it's from Mrs. Dixon. Mrs. Weston is more inclined to think it was from Mr. Knightley,

but Mr. Knightley believes it's from Frank Churchill. Quite a mess, wouldn't you agree?"

"Can we get it out?"

"It's embedded itself now. I'm going to get Churchill to take the rap, and it shouldn't inflict too much damage. But this is down to you, Thursday, and I've got no choice but to suspend you from Jurisdiction duties pending a disciplinary inquiry."

"Let's keep a sense of perspective on this, Bradshaw. I know I'm responsible, but it's not my fault--besides, you told me to do this, and I said I couldn't."

"It's my fault, is it?"

"Partly."

"Humph," replied Bradshaw, bristling his mustache in anger. "I'll take it under advisement--but you're still suspended."

I jerked a thumb in the direction of Thursday1-4. "What about her?"

"She's your cadet, Thursday. *you* deal with it."

He took a deep breath, shook his head, softened for a moment to tell me to look after myself and departed. I told Thursday5 to meet me up at the CofG and beckoned Thursday1-4 into the corridor.

"What the *hell* did you think you were doing?"

"Oh, c'mon," she said, "don't be such a hard-ass. There's no seriously lasting damage. So I dropped a piano into *Emma*--it's not like it landed on anyone."

I stared at her for a moment. Even allowing for Thursday1-4's supreme arrogance, it still didn't make any sense.

"You're not stupid. You *knew* it would get you fired once and for all, so why do it?"

She stared at me with a look of cold hatred. "You were going to fire me anyway. There wasn't a ghost's chance I'd have made it."

"The chance was slim," I admitted, "but it was there."

"I don't agree. You hate me. Always have. From the moment I was first published. We could have been friends, but you never even *visited*. Not once in four entire books. Not a postcard, a footnote, nothing. I'm closer to you than family, Thursday, and you treated me like crap."

And then I understood.

"You put the piano into *Emma* to stitch me up, didn't you?"

"After what you've done to me, you deserve far worse. You had it in for me the moment I arrived at Jurisfiction. You all did."

I shook my head sadly. She was consumed by hate. But instead of trying to deal with it, she just projected it onto everyone around her. I sighed.

"You did this for revenge over some perceived slight?"

"That wasn't revenge," said Thursday1-4 in a quiet voice. "You'll know revenge when you see it."

"Give me your badge."

She dug it from her pocket and then tossed it onto the floor rather than hand it over.

"I quit," she spat. "I wouldn't join Jurisfiction now if you *begged* me."

It was all I could do not to laugh at her preposterous line of reasoning. She couldn't help herself. She was written this way.

"Go on," I said in an even tone, "go home."

She seemed surprised that I was no longer angry.

"Aren't you going to yell at me or hit me or try to kill me or something? Face it: This isn't much of a resolution."

"It's all you're going to get. You really don't understand me at all, do you?"

She glared at me for a moment, then bookjumped out.

I stood in the corridor for a few minutes, wondering if there was anything else I might have done. Aside from not trusting her an inch, not really. I shrugged, tried and failed to get TransGenre Taxis to even *answer* the footnoterphone and then, checking the time so I wouldn't be late for the policy-directive meeting, made my way slowly toward the elevators.

## Policy Directives

The Council of Genres is the administrative body that looks after all aspects of BookWorld regulation, from making policy decisions in the main debating chamber to the day-to-day running of ordinary BookWorld affairs, from furnishing plot devices to controlling the word supply coming in from the Text Sea. They oversee the Book Inspectorate, which governs which books are to be published and which to be demolished, and also Text Grand Central and Jurisdiction--but only regarding policy. For the most part, they are evenhanded but need to be watched, and that's where I come into the equation.

I didn't go straight to either Jurisdiction or the Council of Genres but instead went for a quiet walk in Wainwright's *Pictorial Guide to the Lakeland Fells*. I often go there when in a thoughtful or pensive mood, and although the line drawings that I climbed were not as beautiful nor as colorful as the real thing, they were peaceful and friendly, imbued as they were with a love of the fells that is seldom equaled or surpassed. I sat on the warm sketched grass atop Haystacks, threw a pebble into the tarn and watched the drawn ripples radiate outward. I returned much refreshed an hour later.

I found Thursday5 still waiting for me in the seating area near the picture window with the view of the other towers. She stood up when I approached.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Why?" I responded. "It wasn't your fault."

"But it certainly wasn't yours."

"That's the thing," I replied. "It was. She's a cadet. She has no responsibility. Her faults are mine."

I stopped to think about what I'd just said. Thursday 1-4 was impetuous, passionate and capable of almost uncontrollable rage. Her faults really *were* mine.

I took a deep breath and looked at my watch. "Showtime," I

murmured despondently. "Time for the policy-directive meeting."

"Oh!" exclaimed Thursday5, and then searched through her bag until she found a small yellow book and a pen.

"I hope that's not what I think it is."

"What do you think it is?"

"An autograph book."

She said nothing and bit her lip.

"If you even *think* about asking Harry Potter for an autograph, your day ends right now."

She sighed and dropped the book back into her bag.

The policy meeting was held in the main debating chamber. Jobs-worth's chair was the large one behind the dais, with the seats on either side of him reserved for his closest aides and advisers. We arrived twenty minutes early and were the first ones there. I sat down in my usual seat to the left of where the genres would sit, and Thursday5 sat just behind me. The Read-O-Meter was still clicking resolutely downward, and I looked absently around the chamber, trying to gather my thoughts. Along the side walls were paintings of various dignitaries who had distinguished themselves in one way or another during the Council of Genres' rule--my own painting was two from the end, sandwiched between Paddington Bear and Henry Pooter.

"So what's on the agenda?" asked Thursday5.

I shrugged, having become somewhat ticked off with the whole process. I just wanted to go home--somewhere away from fiction and the parts of me I didn't much care for.

"Who knows?" I said in a nonchalant fashion. "Falling Read-Rates, I imagine--fundamentally, it's all there is."

At that moment the main doors were pushed open and Jobs-worth appeared, followed by his usual retinue of hangers-on. He saw me immediately and chose a route that would take him past my desk.

"Good afternoon, Next," he said. "I heard you were recently suspended?"

"It's an occupational hazard when you're working in the front line," I replied pointedly--Jobsworth had always been administration. If he understood the remark, he made no sign

of it. I added, "Are you well, sir?"

"Can't complain. Which one's that?" he asked, pointing to Thursday5 in much the same way as you'd direct someone to the toilet.

"Thursday5, sir."

"You're making a mistake to fire the other one," said Jobsworth, addressing me. "I'd ask for a second or third opinion about her if there was anyone left to ask. Nevertheless, the decision was yours, and I abide by it. The matter is closed."

"I was down in the maintenance facility recently," I told him, "and Isambard told me that the CofG had insisted on upgrading all the throughput conduits."

"Really?" replied Jobsworth vaguely. "I do wish he'd keep himself to himself."

He walked to the raised dais, sat in the central chair and busied himself with his notes. The room fell silent, aside from the occasional click of the Read-O-Meter as it heralded another drop in the Outland ReadRate.

The next delegate to arrive was Colonel Barksdale, head of the CofG Combined Forces. He sat down four desks away without looking at me. We had not seen eye to eye much in the past, as I disliked his constant warmongering. Next to arrive was Baxter, the senator's chief adviser, who flicked a distasteful look in my direction. In fact, all eight members of the directive panel, except for the Equestrian senator Black Beauty, didn't much like me. It wasn't surprising. I wasn't just the only Outlander member on the panel, I was the LBOCS and consequently wielded the weapon that committees always feared--the veto. I tried to discharge my duties as well as I could, despite the enmity it brought.

I could see Thursday5 move expectantly every time the door opened, but apart from the usual ten members of the committee and their staff, no one else turned up.

"Good afternoon, everyone," said Jobsworth, standing up to address us. There weren't many of us in the debating chamber, but it was usually this way--policy meetings were closed-door affairs.

"Sadly, I have to advise you that Mr. Harry Potter is unable to attend due to copyright restrictions, so we're going to leave

the 'supplying characters from video games' issue for another time."

There was a grumbling from the senators, and I noticed one or two put their autograph books back into their bags.

"Apologies for absence," continued Jobsworth. "Jacob Marley is too alive to attend, the Snork Maiden is at the hairdresser's, and Senator Zigo is once more unavailable. So we'll begin. Item One: the grammasite problem. Mr. Bamford?"

Senator Bamford was a small man with wispy blond hair and eyes that were so small they almost weren't there. He wore a blue coverall very obviously under his senatorial robes and had been in charge of what we called "the grammasite problem" for almost four decades, seemingly to no avail. The predations of the little parasitical beasts upon the books on which they fed was damaging and a constant drain on resources. Despite culling in the past, their numbers were no smaller now than they'd ever been. Mass extermination was often suggested, something the Naturalist genre was violently against. Pests they might be, but the young were cute and cuddly and had big eyes, which was definitely an evolutionary edge to secure survival.

"The problem is so well known that I will not outline it here again, but suffice it to say that numbers of grammasites have risen dramatically over the years, and in order to keep the naturalists happy I suggest we undertake a program of textualization, whereby representative specimens of the seven hundred or so species will be preserved in long-winded accounts in dreary academic tomes. In that way we can preserve the animal and even, if necessary, bring it back from extinction--yet still exterminate the species."

Bamford sat down again, and Jobsworth asked for a show of hands. We all agreed. Grammasites were a pest and needed to be dealt with.

"Item Two," said Jobsworth. "Falling readership figures. Baxter?"

Baxter stood up and addressed the room, although, to be honest, the other delegates--with the possible exception of Beauty--generally went with Jobsworth on everything. The person Baxter really needed to address was me. As the holder

of the only veto, I was the one he would have to swing.

"The falling readership figures have been a matter of some concern for a number of years now, and increased expenditure in the Well of Lost Plots to construct thrilling new books has failed to grasp the imagination of the reading public. As head of the Readership Increasement Committee, I have been formulating some radical ideas to rekindle interest in novels."

He turned over a paper and coughed before continuing.

"After a fact-finding mission conducted in the real world, I have decided that 'interactivity' is the keyword of the new generation. For many readers books are too much of a one-sided conduit of information, and a new form of novel that allows its readers to choose where the story goes is the way forward."

"Isn't that the point of books?" asked Black Beauty, stamping his hoof angrily on the table and upsetting an inkwell. "The pleasure lies in the *unfolding* of the plots. Even if we know what must happen, how one *arrives* there is still entertaining."

"I couldn't agree with you more," remarked Baxter, "but our core readership is aging, and the world's youth is growing up without being in the habit of reading books."

"So what's your suggestion?" asked Jobsworth.

"To create a new form of book--an *interactive* book that begins blank except for ten or so basic characters. Then, as it is written, chapter by chapter, the readers are polled on whom they want to keep and whom they want to exclude. As soon as we know, we write the new section, and at the end of the new chapter we poll the readers again. I call it a 'reality book show'--life as it *really* is, with all the human interactions that make it so rich."

"And the boring bits as well?" I asked, recalling my only experience with reality TV.

"I don't suggest that *every* book should be this way," added Baxter hurriedly, "but we want to make books hip and appealing to the youth market. Society is moving on, and if we don't move with it, books--and we--will vanish."

As if to reinforce his argument, he waved a hand at the Read-O-Meter, which dropped another seventeen books by way of confirmation.



"Why don't we just write better books?" I asked.

"Because it's expensive, it's time-consuming, and there's no guarantee it will work," said Senator Aimsworth, speaking for the first time. "From what I've seen of the real world, interactivity is a sure-fire hit. Baxter is right. The future is reality book shows based on democratic decision making shared by the creators and the readers. Give people what they want and in just the way they want it."

"Once the ball starts rolling downhill, it can't be stopped," I remarked. "This is the wrong route--I can feel it."

"Your loyalty is misplaced, Ms. Next. What could be wrong with offering readers choice? I say we vote on it. All those in favor of directing funds and resources to an interactive reality-book project?"

They all raised their hands--except me and Senator Beauty.

Me because I didn't agree with them and Beauty because he had a hoof. It didn't matter. He was against it.

"As usual," growled Aimsworth, "the contrarian amongst us knows better. Your objections, Ms. Next?"

I took a deep breath. "The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that we're *not* in the book industry. This isn't a publishing meeting with sales targets, goals, market research and focus groups. The book may be the delivery medium, but what we're actually peddling here is *story*. Humans like stories. Humans *need* stories. Stories are good. Stories *work*. Story clarifies and captures the essence of the human spirit. Story, in all its forms--of life, of love, of knowledge--has traced the upward surge of mankind. And story, you mark my words, will be with the last human to draw breath, and we should be there, too, supporting that one last person. I say we place our faith in good stories well told and leave the interactivity as the transient Outlander fad that it is. Instead of being subservient to reader opinion, we should be leading it."

I paused for a moment and stared at the sea of unconvinced faces. The Read-O-Meter clicked down another twenty-eight books.

"Listen, I'm as worried about falling ReadRates as anyone, but wild and desperate measures are not the answer. We've got to go back to the root cause and figure out why people

prefer watching *Samaritan Kidney Swap* to reading a good book. If we *can't* create better books, then we should be doing a lot more than simply dreaming up gimmicks to pander to the lowest common denominator."

There was silence. I meant about 75 percent of it but needed to get the message across. There should be room on this planet for *Dr. Zhivago* and *Extreme Spatula Make over*, but the scales had tipped far enough--and I didn't want them to go any further. They all stared at me in silence as Jobsworth drummed his fingers on the desk.

"Does this mean you are exercising your veto?"

"It does."

There was a collective groan from the other delegates, and I suddenly wondered if I'd gone too far. After all, they had the good of the BookWorld as their priority, as did I--and it wasn't as though I could come up with anything better.

"I'd like to conduct my own study group," I said, hoping that by using their own corporate-buzzword language I might get them to go for it, "and see if I can throw up any strategies to pursue. If I can't, we'll go with your interactivity idea, no matter how dumb it sounds."

"I see," intoned Jobsworth as they all exchanged annoyed looks. "Since I know you too well to expect you to change your mind, we'll reappraise the situation in a week's time and move on. Next item?"

Colonel Barksdale stood up and looked at us all in the somber manner in which he always imparted bad news. He never had anything else. In fact, I think he *engineered* bad news in order to have the plea sure of giving it. He'd been head of BookWorld Defense for the past eight years and clearly wanted to increase his game to include an intragenre war or two. A chance to achieve greatness, if you like.

"I expect you've all heard about Speedy Muffler's recent threat to the stability of the BookWorld?"

We all mumbled our agreement.

"Good. Well, as security is my province, I want you all to agree to a plan of action that is both decisive and *final*. If Muffler can deploy a dirty bomb, then none of us are safe. Hard-liners in Ecclesiastical and Feminist are ready to

mobilize for war to protect their ideologies, and it is my opinion that a preemptive strike will show those immoral bastards that we mean business. I've three brigades of Danverclones ready and waiting to stream across the border. It won't take long--Racy Novel is a ramshackle genre at best."

"Isn't war a bit hasty?" I persisted. "Muffler will try anything to punch above his weight. And even if he *has* developed a dirty bomb, he still has to deliver it. How's he going to smuggle something like that into Feminist? It's got one of the best-protected frontiers in the BookWorld."

"We have it on good authority that they might disguise it as a double entendre in a bedroom farce and deliver it up the rear entrance at Comedy."

"Pure conjecture. What about good old-fashioned diplomacy? You could offer Muffler some Well-surplus subtext or even dialogue to dilute the worst excesses of the genre--he'd probably respond favorably to it. After all, they merely want to develop as a genre."

Colonel Barksdale drummed his fingers impatiently and opened his mouth to speak, but Jobsworth beat him to it.

"That's the worry. Ecclesiastical is concerned that Racy Novel wants to undertake an expansionist policy--there's talk of their wanting to reoccupy the dehumorized zone. Besides," he added, "subtext and dialogue are up to almost seven hundred and fifty guineas a kilo."

"Do we know if they even *have* a dirty bomb?" I asked. "It might all be a bluff."

Jobsworth signaled to Colonel Barksdale, who handed me a dossier marked "Terribly Secret."

"It's no bluff. We've been sent some rather disturbing reports regarding outbreaks of incongruous obscenity from as far away as Drama--Charles Dickens, no less."

"*Bleak House*," I read from the sheet of paper I'd been handed, "and I quote: 'Sir Leicester leans back in his chair, and breathlessly ejaculates.'"

"You see?" said Barksdale as the rest of the delegates muttered to themselves and shook their heads in a shocked manner. "And what about this one?"

He handed me another sheet of paper, this time from

Thomas Hardy's *Mayor of Casterbridge*.

"...the Mayor beheld the unattractive exterior of Farfrae's erection."

"And," he added decisively, "we've got a character named 'Master Bates' turning up all over *Oliver Twist*."

"Master Bates has always been called that," I pointed out. "We used to giggle over the name at school."

"Despite that," replied Colonel Barksdale with no loss of confidence, "the other two are quite enough to have this taken *extremely* seriously. The Danverclones are ready. I only need your approval--"

"It's called 'word drift.'"

It was Thursday5. The meeting had never seen such a flagrant lapse of protocol, and I would have thrown her out myself--but for the fact she had a point.

"I'm sorry," said Senator Jobsworth in a sarcastic tone. "I must have missed the meeting where the other Thursday was elected to the Security Council. Jurisdiction Cadets must train, so I will overlook it this once. But one more word...!"

Unabashed, Thursday5 added, "Did Senator Muffler send those examples to you?"

Senator Jobsworth wasted no time and called over his shoulder to one of the many Danverclones standing close by. "Security? See that Thursday with the flower in her hair? She is to be returned to her--"

"She's with me," I said, staring at Jobsworth, who glared back dangerously, "and I vouch for her. She has opinions that I feel are worth listening to."

Jobsworth and Barksdale went silent and looked at each other, wondering if there wasn't some sort of rule they could invoke. There wasn't. And it was for precisely these moments that the Great Panjandrum had given me the veto--to slow things down and make the Council of Genres think before it acted.

"Well?" I said. "Did Speedy Muffler send those examples to you?"

"Well, not perhaps...as such," replied Colonel Barksdale with a shrug, "but the evidence is unequivocally compelling and totally, absolutely without doubt."

"I contend," added Thursday5, "that they are simply words whose meanings have meandered over the years, and those books were written with *precisely* the words you quoted us now. Word drift."

"I hardly think that's likely, my dear," replied Jobsworth patronizingly.

"Oh, no?" I countered. "Do you mean to tell me that when Lydia from *Pride and Prejudice* thinks of Brighton and '...the glories of the camp--its tents stretched forth in beauteous uniformity of lines, crowded with the young and the gay,' that she might possibly mean something else?"

"Well, no, of course not," replied the senator, suddenly feeling uncomfortable under the combined baleful stares of Thursday5 and me.

There was a mumbling among the other delegates, and I said, "Words change. Whoever sent these examples to you has an agenda, which is more about confrontation than a peaceful outcome to the crisis. I'm going to exercise my veto again. I suggest that a diplomatic resolution be attempted until we have irrefutable evidence that Muffler really has the capabilities he claims."

"This is bad judgment," growled Jobsworth with barely controlled rage as he rose from his seat and gathered his papers together. "You're on morally tricky ground if you side with Racy Novel."

"I'm on morally *trickier* ground if I don't," I replied. "I will not sanction a war on misplaced words in a few of the classics. Show me a blatantly unsubtle and badly written sex scene in *To the Lighthouse* and I will personally lead the battle myself."

Jobsworth stared at me, and I stared back angrily.

"By then the damage will have been done. We want to stop them before they even get started," he insisted.

He paused and composed himself.

"Two vetoes in one day," he added. "You must be particularly pleased with yourself. I hope you have as many smart answers when smutty innuendo is sprinkled liberally across *The Second Sex*."

And without another word, he stormed from the meeting, closely followed by Barksdale, Baxter and all the others, each

of them making tut-tut noises and shaking their heads in a sickening display of inspired toadying. Only Senator Beauty wasn't with them. He shook his own head at me in a gesture meaning "better you than me" and then trotted out.

We were left in silence, aside from the Read-O-Meter, which ominously dropped another thirty-six books.

"That word-drift explanation was really very good," I said to Thursday5 when we were back in the elevator.

"It was nothing, really."

"Nothing?" I echoed. "Don't sell yourself short. You probably just averted a genre war."

"Time will tell. I meant to ask. You said you were the 'LBOCS.' What does that mean?"

"It means I'm the council's Last Bastion of Common Sense. Because I'm from the Outland, I have a better notion of independent thought than those in the generally deterministic BookWorld. Nothing happens without my knowledge or comment."

"That must make you unpopular sometimes."

"No," I replied, "it makes me unpopular *all* the time."

We went back down to the Jurisfiction offices for me to formally hand over my badge to Bradshaw, who took it from me without expression and resumed his work. I returned despondently to where Thursday5 was waiting expectantly at my desk. It was the end of her assessment, and I knew she wanted to be put out of her misery one way or another.

"There are three recommendations I can make," I began, sitting back in my chair. "One: for you to be put forward for further training. Two: for you to be returned to basic training. And three: for you to leave the service entirely."

I looked across at her and found myself staring back at me. It was the look I usually gave to the mirror, and it was disconcerting. But I had to be firm and make my decision based on her performance and suitability.

"You were nearly eaten by a grammasite, and you would have let the Minotaur kill me," I began, "but on the plus side, you came up with the word-drift explanation, which was pretty cool."

She looked hopeful for a moment.

"But I have to take all things under consideration and without bias--either in your favor or against. The Minotaur episode was too important a failing for me to ignore, and much as I like your mildly eccentric ways, I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to recommend that you do not join Jurisfiction, either now or in the future."

She didn't say anything for a while and looked as though she was about to cry, which she did a second or two later. She might have made a decent Jurisfiction agent, but the chances of her getting herself killed were just too high for me to risk. On my graduation assignment, I was almost murdered by a bunch of emotion junkies inside *Shadow the Sheepdog*. Given the same situation, Thursday5 wouldn't have survived, and I wasn't going to have that on my conscience. She wasn't just a version of me, she was something closer to *family*, and I didn't want her coming to any harm.

"I understand," she said between sniffs, dabbing at her nose with a lacy handkerchief.

She thanked me for my time, apologized again for the Minotaur, laid her badge on my desk and vanished off into her book. I leaned back in my chair and sighed--what with firing both Thursdays, I'd really been giving myself a hard time today. I wanted to go home, but the power required for a transfictional jump to the Outland might be tricky on an empty stomach. I looked at my watch. It was only four, and Jurisfiction agents at that time liked to take tea. And to take tea, they generally liked to go to the best tearooms in the BookWorld--or anywhere else, for that matter.

## The Paragon

There are three things in life that can make even the worst problems seem just that tiniest bit better. The first is a cup of tea--loose-leaf Assam with a hint of Lapsang and poured before it gets too dark and then with a dash of milk and the smallest hint of sugar. Calming, soothing and almost without peer. The second, naturally, is a hot soaking bath. The third is Puccini. In the bath with a hot cup of tea and Puccini. Heaven.

It was called the Paragon and was the most perfect 1920s tearoom, nestled in the safe and unobserved background fabric of P. G. Wode house's *Summer Lightning*. To your left and right upon entering through the carved wooden doors were glass display cases containing the most sumptuous homemade cakes and pastries. Beyond these were the tearooms proper, with booths and tables constructed of a dark wood that perfectly matched the paneled interior. This was itself decorated with plaster reliefs of Greek characters disporting themselves in matters of equestrian and athletic prowess. To the rear were two additional and private tearooms, the one of light-colored wood and the other in delicate carvings of a most agreeable nature. Needless to say, it was inhabited by the most populous characters in Wode house's novels. That is to say it was full of voluble and opinionated aunts.

There were two Jurisdiction agents sitting at the table we usually reserved for our three-thirty tea and cakes. The first was tall and dressed in jet black, high-collared robes buttoned tightly up to his throat. He had a pale complexion, prominent cheekbones and a small and very precise goatee. He sat with his arms crossed and was staring at all the other customers in the tearooms with an air of haughty superiority, eyebrows raised imperiously. This was truly a tyrant among tyrants, a ruthless leader who had murdered billions in his never-ending and inadequately explained quest for the unquestioned



obedience of every living entity in the known galaxy. The other, of course, was a six-foot-tall hedgehog dressed in a multitude of petticoats, an apron and bonnet, and carrying a wicker basket of washing. There was no more celebrated partnership in Jurisfiction either then or now--it was Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle and Emperor Zhark. The hedgehog from Beatrix Potter and the emperor from the Zhark series of bad science-fiction novels.

"Good afternoon, Thursday," intoned the emperor when he saw me, a flicker of a smile attempting to crack through his imperialist bearing.

"Hi, Emperor. How's the galactic-domination business these days?"

"Hard work," he replied, rolling his eyes heavenward. "Honestly, I invade peaceful civilizations on a whim, destroy their cities and generally cause a great deal of unhappy mayhem--and then they turn against me for absolutely no reason at all."

"How senselessly irrational of them," I remarked, winking at Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle.

"Quite," continued Zhark, looking aggrieved and not getting the sarcasm. "It's not as though I put them *all* to the sword anyway--I magnanimously decided to spare several hundred thousand as slaves to build an eight-hundred-foot-high statue of myself striding triumphantly over the broken bodies of the vanquished."

"That's probably the reason they don't like you," I murmured.

"Oh?" he asked with genuine concern. "Do you think the statue will be too small?"

"No, it's the 'striding triumphantly over the broken bodies of the vanquished' bit. People generally don't like having their noses rubbed in their ill fortune by the person who caused it."

Emperor Zhark snorted. "That's the problem with inferiors," he said at last. "No sense of humor."

And he lapsed into a sullen silence, took an old school exercise book from within his robes, licked a pencil stub and started to write.

I sat down next to him.

"What's that?"

"My speech. The Thargoids graciously accepted me as god-emperor of their star system, and I thought it might be nice to say a few words--sort of thank them, really, for their kindness--but underscore the humility with veiled threats of mass extermination if they step out of line."

"How does it begin?"

Zhark read from his notes. "'Dear Worthless Peons--I pity you your irrelevance.' What do you think?"

"Well, it's definitely to the point," I admitted. "How are things on the Holmes case?"

"We've been trying to get into the series all morning," said Zhark, laying his modest acceptance speech aside for a moment and taking a spoonful of the pie that had been placed in front of him, "but to no avail. I heard you got suspended. What was that about?"

I told him about the piano and *Emma*, and he whistled low.

"Tricky. But I shouldn't sweat it. I saw Bradshaw writing up the duty rosters for next week, and you're still on them. One moment." He waved a carefully manicured hand at the waitress and said, "Sugar on the table, my girl, or I'll have you, your family and all your descendants put to death."

The waitress bobbed politely, ignored his manner entirely and said, "If you killed me, Your Imperial Mightiness, I wouldn't have any descendants, now would I?"

"Yes, well, *obviously* I meant the ones yet living, girl."

"Oh!" she said. "Just so we're clear on the matter," and with a cute bob she was gone.

"I keep on having trouble with that waitress," muttered Zhark after she had departed. "Do you think she was...mocking me?"

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle, hiding a smile, "I think she was terrified of you."

"Has anyone thought of redirecting the Sherlock Holmes throughput feeds from the Outland?" I asked. "With a well-positioned Textual Sieve, we could bounce the series to a Storycode Engine at TGC and rewrite the ending with the Holmes and Watson from *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*. It will hold things together long enough to give us time to effect a

permanent answer."

"But where *exactly* to put the sieve?" inquired Zhark, not unreasonably.

"What exactly is a Textual Sieve?" asked Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle.

"It's never fully explained," I replied.

The waitress returned with the sugar.

"Thank you," said Zhark kindly. "I have decided to...spare your family."

"Your Highness is overly generous," replied the waitress, humoring him. "Perhaps you could just torture one of us--my younger brother, for instance?"

"No, my mind is made up. You're to be spared. Now begone or I will--Oh, no. You don't trick me that way. Begone or I will *never* torture your family."

The waitress bobbed again, thanked him and was gone.

"Perky, that one, isn't she?" said Zhark, staring after her. "Do you think I should make her my wife?"

"You're considering getting married?" asked Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle, almost scorching a collar in her surprise.

"I think it's high time that I did," he said. "Slaughtering peaceful civilizations on a whim is a lot more fun when you've got someone to do it with."

"Does your mother know about this?" I asked, fully aware of the power that the Dowager Empress Zharkina IV wielded in his books. Emperor Zhark might have been the embodiment of terror across innumerable star systems, but he lived with his mum--and if the rumors were correct, she still insisted on bathing him.

"Well, she doesn't know *yet*," he replied defensively. "But I'm big enough to make my *own* decisions, you know."

Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle and I exchanged knowing looks. Nothing happened in the imperial palace without the empress's agreement.

Zhark chewed for a moment, winced and then swallowed with a look of utter disgust on his face. He turned to Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle.

"I think you've got my pie."

"Have I?" she replied offhandedly. "Now you come to mention it, I thought these slugs tasted sort of funny."

They swapped pies and continued eating.

"Ms. Next?"

I looked up. A confident middle-aged woman was standing next to the table. She had starburst wrinkles around the eyes and graying brown hair, a chicken-pox scar above her left brow, and asymmetric dimples. She was a well-realized character but I didn't recognize her--at least not at first.

"Can I help?" I asked.

"I'm looking for the Jurisfiction agent named Thursday Next."

"That's me."

Our visitor seemed relieved at this and allowed herself a smile. "Pleased to meet you. My name's Dr. Temperance Brennan."

I knew who she was, of course: the heroine of her own genre--that of the forensic anthropologist.

"Very pleased to meet you," I said, rising to shake her hand. "Perhaps you'd care to join us?"

"Thank you, I shall."

"This is Emperor Zhark," I said, "and the one with the spines is Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle."

"Hello," said Zhark, sizing her up for matrimony as he shook her hand. "How would you like the power of life or death over a billion godless heathens?"

She paused for a moment and raised an eyebrow. "Montreal suits me just fine."

She shook Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle's claw, and they exchanged a few pleasantries over the correct method to wash linens. I ordered her some coffee, and after I'd asked about her *Outlander* book sales, which were impressively large compared to mine, she admitted to me that this wasn't a social call.

"I've got an understudy covering for me, so I'll come straight to the point," she said, looking with apparent professional interest at Zhark's high cheekbones. "Someone's trying to kill me."

"You and I have much in common, Dr. Brennan," I replied. "When did this happen?"

"Call me Tempe. Have you read my latest adventure?"

"*Grave Secrets?* Of course."

"Near the end I'm captured after being slipped a Mickey Finn. I talk my way out of it, and the bad guy kills himself."

"So?"

"Thirty-two readings ago, I was drugged for *real* and nearly didn't make it. It was all I could do to stay conscious long enough to keep the book on its tracks. I'm first-person narrative so everything's up to me."

"Yeah," I murmured, "that first-person thing can be a drag. Did you report it to Text Grand Central?"

She pushed the hair away from her face and said, "Naturally. But since I kept the show going, it was never logged as a textual anomaly, so according to TGC there's no crime. You know what they told me? 'Come back when you're dead, and *then* we can do something.'"

"Hmm," I said, drumming my fingers on the desk. "Who do you think is behind it?"

She shrugged. "No one in the book. We're all on very good terms."

"Any skeletons in the closet? If you'll excuse the expression."

"Plenty. In Crime there's always at least one seriously bad guy to deal with per book--sometimes more."

"*Narratively* speaking, that's how it appears," I pointed out. "But with you dead, everyone else in your books would become redundant overnight--and with the possibility of erasure looming over them, your former enemies actually have some of the best reasons to keep you alive."

"Hmm," said Dr. Brenann thoughtfully, "I hadn't thought of it that way."

"The most likely person to want to kill you is someone outside your book--any thoughts?"

"I don't know anyone outside my books--except Kathy and Kerry, of course."

"It won't be them. Leave it with me," I said after a moment's pause, "and I'll see what I can do. Just keep your eyes and ears open, yes?"

Dr. Brennan smiled and thanked me, shook my hand again, said good-bye to Zhark and Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle and was gone, muttering that she had to relieve the substandard and

decidedly bone-idle understudy who was standing in for her.

"What was that all about?" asked Zhark.

"No idea," I replied. "It's kind of flattering that people bring their problems to me. I just wish there were another Thursday to deal with it."

"I thought there was."

"Don't even joke about it, Emperor."

There was a crackle in the air, and Commander Bradshaw suddenly appeared just next to us. Zhark and Tiggy-Winkle looked guilty all of a sudden, and the hedgepig washerwoman made a vain attempt to hide the ironing she was doing.

"I thought I would find you here," he said, mustache all atwilt, as it was when he was a bit peeved. "That wouldn't be moonlighting, would it, Agent Tiggy-Winkle?"

"Not at all," she replied. "I spend so much time at Jurisdiction I can hardly get through the ironing I need to do for my own book!"

"Very well," said Bradshaw slowly, turning to me. "I thought I'd find *you* here, too. I have a job that only you can handle."

"I thought I was suspended?"

He passed me my badge. "The suspension was purely for the CofG's benefit. The disciplinary paperwork was accidentally eaten by snails. Most perplexing."

I smiled. "What's up?"

"A matter of great delicacy. There were a few minor textual irregularities in...the Thursday books."

"Which ones?" I asked, suddenly worried that Thursday5 might have taken her failure to heart.

"The first four. Since you know them quite well and no one else wants to touch them or her with a barge pole, I thought you might want to check it out."

"What sorts of irregularities?"

"Small ones," said Bradshaw, handing me a sheet of paper. "Nothing you'd notice from the Outland unless you were a committed fan. I'm thinking it might be the early stage of a breakdown."

He didn't mean a breakdown in the Outlander sense. In the BookWorld a breakdown meant an internal collapse of the character's pattern of reason--the rules that made one

predictable and understandable. Some, like Lucy Deane, collapsed spontaneously and with an annoying regularity; others just crumbled slowly from within, usually as a result of irreconcilable conflicts within their character. In either case, replacement by a fully trained-up generic was the only option. Of course, it might be nothing and very possible that Thursday1-4 was just angry about being fired and venting her spleen on the co-characters in the series.

"I'll check her out."

"Good," said Bradshaw, turning to Zhark and Tiggy-Winkle. "And you two--I want you all geared up and ready to try to get into 'The Speckled Band' by way of 'The Disintegrator Ray' by fourteen hundred hours."

Bradshaw looked at his clipboard and then vanished. We all stood up.

"Do you want us to come with you?" asked Zhark. "Strictly speaking, your checking up on Thursday1-4 is a conflict-of-interest transgression."

"I'll be fine," I said, and the pair of them wished me well and vanished, like Bradshaw, into thin air.

## Thursday Next

I was only vaguely consulted when the first four of the Thursday Next books were constructed. I was asked about my car, my house, and I even lent them a photo album (which I never got back). I was also introduced to the bland and faceless generic who would eventually become Thursday1-4. The rest was created from newspaper reports and just plucked from the air. If I'd cared more about how it all was going to turn out, perhaps I would have given them more time.

After another fruitless argument with the dispatcher at TransGenre Taxis, who told me they had two drivers off sick and it wasn't their fault but they would "see what could be done," I took the elevator down to the sixth floor of the Great Library and walked to the section of shelving that carried all five of the Thursday books, from *The Eyre Affair* all the way through to *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco*. There was every edition, too--from publisher's proof to hardback, large print and mass-market paperback. I picked up a copy of *The Eyre Affair* and looked carefully for a way in. I knew that the book was first-person narrative, and having a second me clearly visible to readers would be wildly confusing--if the book wasn't confusing enough already. I soon found what I was looking for: a time lapse of six weeks after Landen's death near the beginning of the book. I scanned the page for the correct place, and, using an oblique, nonappearing-entry method taught to me by Miss Havisham, I slipped unseen into the end of chapter one.

I arrived in the written Swindon just as the sun was dipping below the horizon, and I was standing opposite our house in the Old Town. Or at least it was the *remains* of our house. The fire had just been put out, and the building was now a blackened ruin, the still-hot timbers steaming as they were doused with water. Through the twinkling of blue and red



emergency lights, I could see a small figure sitting in the back of an ambulance, a blanket draped across her shoulders. The legal necessity of removing Landen from the series was actually a blessing in disguise for the publishers. It freed up their Thursday romantically and also gave a reason for her psychotic personality. Boy, was this book ever *crap*.

I waited in the crowd for a moment until I could sense that the chapter was over, then approached Thursday1-4, who had her back to me and was talking to a badly realized version of Bowden, who in this book was known by the legally unactionable "Crowden Babel."

"Good evening," I said, and Thursday jumped as though stuck with a cattle prod.

"What are you doing here?" she asked without turning around.

"Text Grand Central saw a few wrinkles in the narrative, and you're too unpleasant for anyone other than me to come and have a look."

"It's okay," she said, "everything's fine. It's probably a Storycode Engine on the fritz. A buildup of irony on the dialogue injectors or something."

She seemed jittery but still didn't want to turn and look at me straight on.

"You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure--do you think I don't know my own book? I'm afraid I must go. I've got to run through some lines with the replacement Hades."

"Wait," I said, and grabbed her arm. I pulled her around to face...*someone else entirely*. It wasn't Thursday1-4. It was a woman with the same coloring and build, clothes and general appearance, but it wasn't her.

"Who the hell are you?" I demanded.

She sighed heavily and shrugged. "I'm...I'm...a character understudy."

"I can see that. Do you have a name?"

"Alice-PON-24330," she replied resignedly.

"This series isn't up for maintenance for years. What are you doing here?"

She bit her lip, looked away and shifted her weight uneasily.

"If she finds I've talked...well, she has a *temper*."

"And I don't?"

She said nothing. I turned to Crowden Babel. "Where is she?"

He rubbed his face but said nothing. It seemed I was the only person *not* frightened by Thursday1-4.

"Listen," I said to Babel, pointing at Alice-PON-24330, "she's just an understudy and is like a phone number--replaceable. You're in every book and have a lot more to lose. Now, either you talk to me right this minute and it goes no further or we turn you over to Jurisfiction and thirty tons of prime-quality shit is going to descend on you from a very great height."

Babel scratched the back of his head. "She does this every now and then. She thinks the series is too small for her."

Babel and the ersatz Thursday glanced nervously at each other. There was something else going on. This wasn't just a simple substitution so Thursday1-4 could have a break.

"Somebody better start talking, or you'll discover where she gets her temper from. Now, *where has she gone?*"

Babel looked nervously around. "She came back *furiously*. Said you'd fired her on false pretenses and she wanted to get some...serious payback."

"What sort of payback?"

"I don't know."

"If you're lying to me!"

"I swear on the life of the Great Panjan--"

"I know where she is," said the ersatz Thursday in a quiet voice. "What the hell. When she discovers I've talked to you, I'll be dead anyway. She's out...in the *real world!*"

This was serious. Substitution and illegal pagerunning were one thing, but crossing over to the real world was quite another. I could legally erase her on sight, and the way I felt right now, I--

My thoughts were interrupted because both Crowden and the understudy had looked anxiously toward the burned-out shell of the house. I suddenly had a very nasty thought, and my insides changed to lead. I could barely say the word, but I did:

"*Landen?*"

"Yes," said the understudy in a soft voice. "She wanted to

know what it was...to love."

I felt anger well up inside me. I pulled out my TravelBook and read as I walked toward the house. As I did so, the evening light brightened, the emergency vehicles faded back into fiction, and the house, which burned to a husk in *The Eyre Affair*, was suddenly perfect again as I moved back into the real world. My mouth felt dry after the jump, and I could feel a headache coming on. I broke into a panicky sweat and dumped my jacket and bag in the front garden but kept my pistol and slipped a spare eraserhead into my back pocket. I very quietly stepped up to the front door and silently slipped the key into the lock.

The house was silent aside from the thumping of my heart, which in my heightened state of anxiety was almost deafening. I had planned to lie in wait for her, but a glance down at the hall table made me reappraise the situation. My house keys and distinctive grammasite key ring were already lying where I left them--*but I still had mine in my hand*. I felt powerfully thirsty, too, and was badly dehydrated--the most annoying side effect of my return to the Outland. I looked through to the kitchen and could see a pitcher of half-finished juice on the kitchen drainer. If I didn't drink something soon, I'd pass out. On the other hand, Thursday1-4 was somewhere in the house, waiting for Landen or rummaging in our sock drawer or something. I silently crept along the downstairs hallway, checked the front room, then went through to the dining room beyond and from there to the kitchen. The only thing I noticed out of place was a book of family holiday snapshots open on the coffee table. I moved into the kitchen and was about to take a swig of juice straight from the pitcher when I heard a noise that turned my blood to ice. I dropped the pitcher, which shattered on the kitchen floor with a concussion that echoed around the house.

Pickwick woke up in her basket and started plocking at everything in sight until she saw who it was and went back to sleep. I heard voices upstairs and the sound of footsteps padding across the bedroom floor. I held my pistol at arm's length and walked slowly down the hall to the stairs. The sound that had made me drop the pitcher was *Landen*, but it

was the sort of sound that only *I* ever heard him make--something that was for me and me alone.

I rounded the newel post and looked up. Almost immediately Thursday<sup>1-4</sup> stepped onto the landing, completely naked and holding her automatic. Fictional she might have been, but out here she was as deadly as any real person. We stared at each other for a moment, and she fired. I felt her shot whine past me and embed itself in the doorframe. At almost exactly the same time, I fired my pistol. There was a low thud, and the air wobbled as though momentarily seen through a milk bottle. She jumped back into the bedroom as the wide spread of the eraserhead hit harmlessly on the walls and stairs--the charge only affected anything *textual*. She'd know my weapon was a single shot, so I turned on my heels and ran back through the front room, breaking the pistol open to reload. The cartridge ejected with a soft *thwup*, and I yanked the spare out of my back pocket and pushed it into the breech. There was a detonation and another whine of a near miss as I jumped across the breakfast table and snapped the pistol shut with a flick of my wrist. I pulled the heavy oak kitchen table to shield me, and three shots smashed into the wood. I heard the sound of footsteps running away and rose to fire at her retreating form. The dull thud of the eraserhead echoed around the room, and there was a mild hiss as it struck its mark. I heard the front door open, I got up--slightly too quickly--and the room went squiffy. I staggered to the sink and drank from the running tap and then, still feeling light-headed but tolerably alert, stumbled up the hall to the open front door. There was a small scattering of fine text on the doorstep and more leading out into the front garden, where I saw her automatic lying on the garden path. I turned and yelled upstairs, "Stay where you are, Land!" and then followed the trail of text to the front gate, where there was a random sprinkling of letters. I cursed. There wasn't enough here to be fatal--I'd probably just clipped her and caused a small part of her to unravel. It was no big deal. She could have another body part written exclusively for her down in the Well.

My shoulder bag was still where I'd left it in the front garden, and I rummaged inside for a spare eraserhead. I

slipped the shiny cartridge into the barrel, then stopped. Something was *wrong*. I searched the bag more frantically, then all around the area nearby, but found only a light smattering of text. The wounded Thursday1-4 had been here-- *and taken my TravelBook*. I looked around, closed the pistol and followed the small trail of letters to the garden gate, where they ended abruptly. I gazed out into the empty street. Nothing. She had jumped out, back to where she belonged-- and with my TravelBook. My *TravelBook*.

I wiped the sweat from my brow and muttered, "Shit-shit-shit-*SHIT*."

I turned and ran back to the house but then stopped as I suddenly had a series of terrible thoughts. Thursday1-4's adventures ranged across several years, so she wasn't particularly age-specific. Landen couldn't know that it was not me but my fictional counterpart he'd just made love to. I didn't bear him any malice--I mean, it wasn't as if he'd slept with another woman or anything. But because he knew nothing about Jurisfiction and it was better for our relationship that he *never* knew, there was only one course of action I could take.

"Hang on, Land!" I yelled upstairs. "I'm okay. Just stay where you are."

"Why?" he yelled back.

"Just do as I ask, sweetheart."

I grabbed the dustpan and brush and hurriedly swept up the text that littered the front step and the path, and when I heard the distant wail of the police sirens, I went back indoors, took off all my clothes, stashed them behind the sofa and ran upstairs.

"What's going on?" asked Land, who had just gotten his leg and trousers on. I wrapped myself in a robe but couldn't look at him and just sat at the dressing table, clenching and unclenching my fists to try to control the violent thoughts. Then I realized: After what she'd done, I could think about wringing her badly written neck as much as I wanted. I was a woman wronged. Dangerously violent thoughts were *allowed*. I'd get her for this, but I was in no hurry. She had nowhere to go. I knew *exactly* where I could find her.

"Nothing's going on," I said in a quiet voice. "Everything's

fine."

## Bound to the Outland

Although we never really saw eye to eye with the local police force when we were SpecOps, we always used to help them out if they got into a jam, and the young ones never forgot it. Hard not to, really, when some lunatic plucks you from the jaws of a werewolf or something. Because of this I was still granted favors in return. Not parking tickets, unfortunately--just the big stuff.

By the time the police arrived, I had regained control of myself. I picked up Thursday1-4's clothes with a disdainful finger and thumb and deposited them in the laundry basket, in which I would take them out to burn them later that evening. I went through the pockets of her jacket but found only an empty wallet and a few coins. I knew I was going to have to admit to owning her automatic, so I had to hope they would take my previous exemplary conduct into account before citing me on any illegal-firearms charges. While I explained it all to the cops, Landen called Joffy's partner, Miles, to get him to pick up the girls from school, and we eventually tracked Friday down at Mum's, where he'd been discussing with his aunt the merits of the guitar riff on the second track of *Hosing the Dolly*.

"So let me get this straight," said Detective Inspector Jamison an hour later, thumbing through his notes. "You were both upstairs...er, *naked* when you heard a noise. You, Mrs. Parke-Laine-Next, went downstairs to investigate with an illegally held Glock nine-millimeter. You saw this man whom you identified as 'Felix8,' an associate of the deceased Acheron Hades, whom you last met sixteen years ago. He was armed, and you fired at him once when he was standing at the door, once when he was running to the kitchen, then three times as he hid behind the kitchen table. He then made his escape from the house without firing a single shot. Is that correct?"

"Quite correct, Officer."

"Hmm," he said, and his sergeant whispered something in his ear and handed him a fax. Jamison looked at it, then at me. "You're *sure* it was Felix8?"

"Yes--why?"

He placed the fax on the table and slid it across.

"The body of missing father of two Danny Chance was discovered in a shallow grave in the Savernake Forest three years ago. It was skeletal by then and only identifiable by his dental records."

"That's not possible," I murmured, with good reason. Even if he hadn't been in the house this afternoon, I'd certainly seen him yesterday.

"I know that Hades and Felix are tied up in all manner of weird shit, so I'm not going to insist you *didn't* see him, but I thought you should know this."

"Thank you, Officer," I muttered, reading through the report, which was unequivocal; it even said the bones had been in the ground a good ten years. Aornis had been right--Cocytus *had* killed him like a stray dog.

Inspector Jamison turned to Landen. "Mr. Parke-Laine? May we speak to you now?"

They finally left at nine in the evening and we called Miles to bring the kids back. We'd been given the all-clear to tidy up, and to be honest it didn't sound as though they were gong to make a big deal of it. It didn't look as if they would even bother to prosecute; they knew about Felix8--everyone did. He, Hades and Aornis were as much a part of popular culture as Robin Hood. And that was it. They took the Glock nine-millimeter, privately told me that it was an honor to meet me and that I could expect their report to be lost before being passed to the prosecutor, and then they were gone.

"Darling?" said Landen as soon as the kids had been safely returned home.

"Yes?"

"Something's bothering you."

"You mean aside from having an amoral lunatic who died fifteen years ago try to kill us?"

"Yes. There's something else on your mind."



Damn. Found out. Lucky I had *several* things on my mind I could call upon.

"I went to visit Aornis."

"You did? Why?"

"It was about Felix8. I should have told you: He was hanging around the house yesterday. Millon spotted him, and Spike nabbed him--but he escaped. I thought Aornis might have an idea why he's suddenly emerged after all these years."

"Did Aornis...say anything about us?" asked Landen. "Friday, Me, Tuesday, Jenny?"

"She asked how everyone was, but only in an ironic way. I don't think she was concerned in the least--quite the opposite."

"Did she say anything else?"

I turned to look at him, and he was gazing at me with such concern that I rested a hand on his cheek.

"Sweetheart--what's the matter? She can't harm us any longer."

"No," said Landen with a sigh, "she can't. I just wondered if she said anything--anything at all. Even if you remembered it later."

I frowned. Landen knew about Aornis's powers because I'd told him, but his specific interest seemed somehow unwarranted.

"Yeah. She said that she was going to bust out with the help of someone 'on the outside.'"

He took my hands in his and stared into my eyes. "Thursday--sweetheart--promise me something?"

I laughed at his dramatic earnestness but stopped when I saw he was serious.

"Two minds with but a single thought," I told him, "two hearts that beat as one."

"That was good. Who said that?"

"Mycroft."

"Ah! Well, here it is: Don't let Aornis out."

"Why should I want to do that?"

"Trust me, darling. Even if you forget your own name, remember this: *Don't let Aornis out.*"

"Babes--"

But he rested his finger on my lips, and I was quiet. Aornis

was the least of my worries. Without my TravelBook I was marooned in the Outland.

We had dinner late. Even Friday was vaguely impressed by the three bullet holes in the table. They were so close they almost looked like one.

When he saw them, he said, "Nice grouping, Mum."

"Firearms are no joking matter, young man."

"That's our Thursday," said Landen with a smile. "When she shoots up our furniture, she does as little damage as possible."

I looked at them all and laughed. It was an emotional release, and tears sprang to my eyes. I helped myself to more salad and regarded Friday. There was still the possibility of his replacement by the-Friday-that-could-have-been hanging over him. The thing was, I couldn't do anything about it. There's never anywhere to hide from the ChronoGuard. But the other Friday had told me I had forty-eight hours until they might attempt such a thing, and that wasn't up until midmorning the day after tomorrow.

"Fri," I said, "have you thought any more about the time industry?"

"Lots," he said, "and the answer's still no."

Landen and I exchanged looks.

"Have you ever wondered," remarked Friday in a languid monotone from behind a curtain of oily hair, "how nostalgia isn't what it used to be?"

I smiled. Dopey witticisms at least showed he was *trying* to be clever, even if for the greater part of the day he was asleep.

"Yes," I replied, "and imagine a world where there were no hypothetical situations."

"I'm *serious*," he said, mildly annoyed.

"Sorry!" I replied. "It's just difficult to know what you're thinking when I can't see your face. I might as well converse to the side of a yak."

He parted his hair so I could see his eyes. He looked a lot like his father did at that age. Not that I knew him then, of course, but from photographs.

"Nostalgia used to have a minimum twenty years before it kicked in," he said in all seriousness, "but now it's getting shorter and shorter. By the late eighties, people were doing

seventies stuff, but by the mid-nineties the eighties-revival thing was in full swing. It's now 2002, and already people are talking about the nineties--soon nostalgia will catch up with the present and we won't have any need for it."

"Good thing, too, if you ask me," I said. "I got rid of all my seventies rubbish as soon as I could and never regretted it for a second."

There was an indignant plook from Pickwick.

"Present company excepted."

"I think the seventies are underrated," said Landen. "Admittedly, fashion wasn't terrific, but there's been no better decade for sitcoms."

"Where's Jenny?"

"I took her dinner up to her," said Friday. "She said she needed to do her homework."

I frowned as I thought of something, but Landen clapped his hands together and said, "Oh, yes! Did you hear that the British bobsled team has been disqualified for using the banned force 'gravity' to enhance performance?"

"No."

"Apparently so. And it transpires that the illegal use of gravity to boost speed is endemic within most downhill winter sports."

"I wondered why they managed to go so fast," I replied thoughtfully.

Much later that night, when the lights were out, I was staring at the glow of the streetlamps on the ceiling and thinking about Thursday1-4 and what I'd do to her when I caught her. It wasn't terribly pleasant.

"Land?" I whispered in the darkness.

"Yes?"

"That time we...made love today."

"What about it?"

"I was just thinking--how did you rate it? Y'know, on a one-to-ten?"

"Truthfully?"

"Truthfully."

"You won't be pissed off at me?"

"Promise."

There was a pause. I held my breath.

"We've had better. *Much* better. In fact, I thought you were pretty terrible."

I hugged him. At least there was one piece of good news today.

## The Discreet Charm of the Outland

The real charm of the Outland was the richness of detail and the *texture*. In the BookWorld a pig is generally just pink and goes oink. Because of this, most fictional pigs are simply a uniform flesh color without any of the tough bristles and innumerable scabs and skin abrasions, shit and dirt that makes a pig a pig. And it's not just pigs. A carrot is simply a rod of orange. Sometimes living in the BookWorld is like living in Legoland.

The stupidity surplus had been beaten into second place by the news that the militant wing of the no-choice movement had been causing trouble in Manchester. Windows were broken, cars overturned, and there were at least a dozen arrests. With a nation driven by the concept of choice, a growing faction of citizens who thought life was simpler when options were limited had banded themselves together into what they called the "no-choicers" and demanded the choice to have no choice. Prime Minister Redmond van de Poste condemned the violence but explained that the choice of choice over "just better services" was something the *previous* administration had chosen and was thus itself a no-choice principle for the current administration. Alfredo Traficcone, MP, leader of the opposition Prevailing Wind Party, was quick to jump on the bandwagon, proclaiming that it was the inalienable right of all citizens to have the choice over whether they have choice or not. The no-choicers had suggested that there should be a referendum to settle the matter once and for all, something that the opposition "choice" faction had no option but to agree with. More sinisterly, the militant wing known only as NOPTION was keen to go further and demanded that there should be only one option on the ballot paper--the no-choice one.

It was eight-thirty, and the girls had already gone to school.

"Jenny didn't eat her toast again," I said, setting the plate with its uneaten contents next to the sink. "That girl hardly eats a thing."

"Leave it outside Friday's door," said Landen. "He can have it for lunch when he gets up--*if* he gets up."

The front doorbell had rung, and I checked on who it might be through the front-room windows before opening the door to reveal...Friday. The *other* Friday.

"Hello!" I said cheerily. "Would you like to come in?"

"I'm in a bit of a hurry," he replied. "I just wondered whether you'd thought about my offer of replacement yesterday. Hi, Dad!"

Landen had joined us at the door. "Hello, son."

"This," I said by way of introduction, "is the Friday I was telling you about--the one we were supposed to have."

"At your service," said Friday politely. "And your answer? I'm sorry to push you on this, but time travel has still to be invented and we have to look very carefully at our options."

Landen and I glanced at each other. We'd already made up our mind.

"The answer's no, Sweetpea. We're going to keep *our* Friday."

Friday's face fell, and he glared at us. "This is so typical of you. Here I am a respected member of the ChronoGuard, and you're still treating me like I'm a kid!"

"Friday!"

"How stupid can you both be? The history of the world hangs in the balance, and all you can do is worry about your lazy shitbag of a son."

"You talk like that to your mother and you can go to your room."

"He *is* in his room, Land."

"Right. Well...you know what I mean."

Friday snorted, glared at us both, told me that I really shouldn't call him "Sweetpea" anymore and walked off, slamming the garden gate behind him.

I turned to Landen. "Are we doing the right thing?"

"Friday told us to dissuade him from joining the ChronoGuard, and that's what we're doing."

I narrowed my eyes, trying to remember.

"He did? When?"

"At our wedding bash? When Lavoisier turned up looking for your father?"

"Shit," I said, suddenly remembering. Lavoisier was my least favorite ChronoGuard operative, and on that occasion he had a partner with him--a lad of about twenty-five who'd looked vaguely familiar. We figured it out several years later. It was Friday *himself*, and his advice to us was unequivocal: "If you ever have a son who wants to be in the ChronoGuard, try to dissuade him." Perhaps it wasn't just a complaint--perhaps it had been...a *warning*.

Landen placed a hand on my waist and said, "I think we should follow his best advice and see where it leaves us."

"And the End of Time?"

"Didn't your father say that the world was *always* five minutes from total annihilation? Besides, it's not until Friday evening. It'll work itself out."

I took the tram into work and was so deep in thought I missed my stop and had to walk back from MycroTech. Without my TravelBook I was effectively stuck in the real world, but instead of feeling a sense of profound loss as I had expected, I felt something more akin to *relief*. In my final day as the LBOCS, I had scotched any chance of book interactivity or the preemptive strike on Speedy Muffler and the ramshackle Racy Novel, and the only worrying loose end was dealing with slutty bitchface Thursday1-4. That was if she hadn't been erased on sight for making an unauthorized trip to the Outland. Well, I could always hope. Jurisfiction had gotten on without me for centuries and would doubtless continue to do so. There was another big plus point, too: I wasn't lying to Landen quite as much. Okay, I still did a bit of SpecOps work, but at least this way I could downgrade my fibs from "outrageous" to a more manageable "whopping." All of a sudden, I felt really quite happy--and I didn't often feel that way. If there hadn't been a major problem with Acme's overdraft and the potential for a devastating chronoclasm in two and a half days, everything might be just perfect.

"You look happy," said Bowden as I walked into the office at

Acme.

"Aren't I always?"

"No," he said, "hardly at all."

"Well, this is the new me. Have you noticed how much the birds are singing this morning?"

"They always sing like that."

"Then...the sky is always that blue, yes?"

"Yes. May I ask what's brought on this sudden change?"

"The BookWorld. I've stopped going there. It's over."

"Well," said Bowden, "that's *excellent* news!"

"It is, isn't it? More time for Landen and the kids."

"No," said Bowden, choosing his words carefully, "I mean excellent news for Acme--we might finally get rid of the backlog."

"Of undercover SpecOps work?"

"Of *carpets*."

"You mean you can make a profit selling carpets?" I asked, having never really given it a great deal of thought.

"Have you seen the order books? They're full. More work than we can handle. Everyone needs floor coverings, Thurs--and if you can give some of your time to get these orders filled, then we won't need the extra cash from your illegal-cheese activities."

He handed me a clipboard.

"All these customers need to be contacted and given the best deal we can."

"Which is?"

"Just smile, chat, take the measurements, and I'll do the rest."

"Then *you* go."

"No, the big selling point for Acme is that Thursday Next--the Z-4 *celebrity* Thursday Next--comes and talks to you about your floor-covering needs. That's how we keep our heads above water. That's how we can support all these ex-SpecOps employees."

"C'mon," I said doubtfully, "ex-celebrities don't do retail."

"After the disaster of the *Eyre Affair* movie, Lola Vavoom started a chain of builders' merchants."

"She did, didn't she?"



I took the clipboard and stared at the list. It was long. Business was good. But Bowden's attention was suddenly elsewhere.

"Is that who I think it is?" he asked, looking toward the front of the store. I followed his gaze. Standing next to the cushioned-linoleum display was a man in a long dark coat. When he saw us watching him, he reached into his pocket and flashed a badge of some sort.

"Shit," I murmured under my breath. "Flanker."

"He probably wants to buy a carpet," said Bowden with a heavy helping of misplaced optimism.

Commander Flanker was our old nemesis from SO-1, the SpecOps department that policed other SpecOps departments. Flanker had adapted well to the disbanding of the service. Before, he made life miserable for SpecOps agents he thought were corrupt, and now he made life miserable for *ex*-SpecOps agents he thought were corrupt. We had crossed swords many times in the past, but not since the disbandment. We regarded it as a good test of our discretion and secrecy that we had never seen him at Acme Carpets. Then again, perhaps we were kidding ourselves. He might know all about us but thought flushing out renegade operatives just wasn't worth his effort--especially when we were actually doing a service that no one else wanted to do.

I walked quickly to the front of the shop.

"Good morning, Ms. Next," he said, glancing with ill-disguised mirth at my name embroidered above the company logo on my jacket. "Literary Detective at SO-27 to carpet layer? Quite a fall, don't you think?"

"It depends on your point of view," I said cheerfully. "Everyone needs carpets--but not everyone needs SpecOps. Is this a social call?"

"My wife has read all your books."

"They're not *my* books," I told him in an exasperated tone. "I had absolutely no say in their content--for the first four anyway."

"Those were the ones she liked. The violent ones full of sex and death."

"Did you come all this way to give me your wife's analysis of

my books?"

"No," he said, "that was just the friendly breaking-the-ice part."

"It isn't working. Is there a floor covering I could interest you in?"

"Axminster."

"We can certainly help you with *that*," I replied professionally. "Living room or bedroom? We have some very hard-wearing wool/acrylic at extremely competitive prices--and we've a special this week on underlayment and free installation."

"It was Axminster *Purple* I was referring to," he said slowly, staring at me intently. My heart jumped but I masked it well. Axminster Purple wasn't a carpet at all, of course, although to be honest there probably *was* an Axminster in purple, if I looked. No, he was referring to the semi-exotic cheese, one that I'd been trading in only a couple of days ago. Flanker showed me his badge. He was CEA--the Cheese Enforcement Agency.

"You're not here for the carpets, are you?"

"I know you have form for cheese smuggling, Next. There was a lump of Rhayder Speckled found beneath a Hispano-Suiza in '86, and you've been busted twice for possession since then. The second time you were caught with six kilos of Streaky Durham. You were lucky to be fined only for possession and not trading without a license."

"Did you come here to talk about my past misdemeanors?"

"No. I've come to you for information. While cheese smuggling is illegal, it's considered a low priority. The CEA has always been a small department more interested in collecting duty than banging up harmless cheeseheads. That's all changed."

"It has?"

"I'm afraid so," replied Flanker grimly. "There's a new cheese on the block. Something powerful enough to make a user's head vanish in a ball of fire."

"That's a figure of speech for 'really powerful,' right?"

"No," said Flanker with deadly seriousness. "The victim's head really *does* vanish in a ball of fire. It's a killer, Next--and

addictive. It's apparently the finest and most powerful cheese ever designed."

This was worrying. I never regarded my cheese smuggling as anything more than harmless fun, cash for Acme and to supply something that should be legal anyway. If a cheese that I'd furnished had killed someone, I would face the music. Mind you, I'd tried most of what I'd flogged, and it was, after all, only cheese. Okay, so the taste of a particularly powerful cheese might render you unconscious or make your tongue numb for a week, but it never killed anyone--until now.

"Does this cheese have a name?" I asked, wondering if there'd been a bad batch of Machynlleth Wedi Marw.

"It only has a code name: X-14. Rumor says it's so powerful that it has to be kept chained to the floor. We managed to procure a half ounce. A technician dropped it by mistake, and this was the result."

He showed me a photograph of a smoking ruin.

"The remains of our central cheese-testing facility."

He put the photograph away and stared at me. Of course, I *had* seen some X-14. It'd been chained up in the back of Pryce's truck the night of the cheese buy. Owen had declined to even show it to me. I'd traded with him every month for over eight years, and I never thought he was the sort of person to knowingly peddle anything dangerous. He was like me: someone who just loved cheese. I wouldn't snitch on him, not yet--not before I had more information.

"I don't know anything," I said at length, "but I can make inquiries."

Flanker seemed to be satisfied with this, handed me his card and said in a stony voice, "I'll expect your call."

He turned and walked out of the store to a waiting Range Rover and drove off.

"Trouble for us?" asked Bowden as soon as I returned.

"No," I replied thoughtfully, "trouble for me."

He sighed. "That's a relief."

I took a deep breath and thought for a moment. Communications into the Socialist Republic of Wales were nonexistent--when I wanted to contact Pryce, I had to use a shortwave wireless transmitter at prearranged times. There

was nothing I could do for at least forty-eight hours.

"So," continued Bowden, handing me the clipboard with the list of people wanting quotes on it, "how about some Acme Carpets stuff?"

"What about SpecOps work?" I asked. "How's that looking?"

"Stig's still on the case of the *Diatrymas* and has at least a half dozen outstanding chimeras to track down. Spike has a few biters on the books, and there's talk of another SEB over in Reading."

It was getting desperate. I loved Acme, but only insofar as it was excellent cover and I never actually had to do anything carpet-related.

"And us? The ex-Literary Detectives?"

"Still nothing, Thursday."

"What about Mrs. Mattock over in the Old Town? She still wants us to find her first editions, surely?"

"No," said Bowden. "She called yesterday and said she was selling her books and replacing them with cable TV--she wanted to watch *En gland's Funniest Chain-Saw Mishaps*."

"And I felt so good just now."

"Face it," said Bowden sadly, "books are finished. No one wants to invest the time in them anymore."

"I don't believe you," I replied, an optimist to the end. "I reckon if we went over to the Booktastic! megastore, they'd tell us that books are still being sold hand over fist to hardcore story aficionados. In fact, I'll bet you that jar of cookies you've got hidden under your desk that you think no one knows about."

"And if they're not?"

"I'll spend a day installing carpets and pressing flesh as the Acme Carpets celebrity saleswoman."

It was a deal. Acme was on a trading estate with about twenty or so outlets, but, unusually, it was the only carpet showroom--we always suspected that Spike might have a hand in scaring off the competition, but we never saw him do it. Between us and Booktastic! there were three sporting-goods outlets all selling exactly the same goods at exactly the same price and, since they were three branches of the same store, with the same sales staff, too. The two discount electrical

shops actually *were* competitors but still spookily managed to sell the same goods at the same price, although "sell" in this context actually meant "serve as brief custodian between outlet and landfill."

"Hmm," I said as we stood inside the entrance of Booktastic! and stared at the floor display units liberally stacked with CDs, DVDs, computer games, peripherals and special-interest magazines. "I'm sure there was a book in here last time I came in. Excuse me?"

A shop assistant stopped and stared at us in a vacant sort of way.

"I was wondering if you had any books."

"Any *what*?"

"Books. Y'know--about so big and full of words arranged in a specific order to give the effect of reality?"

"You mean DVDs?"

"No, I mean *books*. They're kind of old-fashioned."

"Ah!" she said. "What you mean are *videotapes*."

"No, what I mean are *books*."

We'd exhausted the sum total of her knowledge, so she went into default mode. "You'll have to see the manager. She's in the coffee shop."

"Which one?" I asked, looking around. There appeared to be three--and this wasn't Booktastic!'s biggest outlet either.

"That one."

We thanked her and walked past boxed sets of obscure sixties TV series that were better--and safer--within the rose-tinted glow of memory.

"This is all so wrong," I said, beginning to think I might lose the bet. "Less than five years ago, this place was all books and nothing else. What the hell's going on?"

We arrived at the coffee shop and couldn't see the manager, until we noticed that they had opened a smaller branch of the coffee shop actually *inside* the existing one, and named it "X-press" or "On-the-Go" or "More Profit" or something.

"Thursday Next," I said to the manager, whose name we discovered was Dawn.

"A great plea sure," she replied. "I did so love your books--especially the ones with all the killing and gratuitous sex."

"I'm not really like that in real life," I replied. "My friend Bowden and I wondered if you'd sold many books recently or, failing that, if you have any or know what one is?"

"I'm sure there are a few somewhere," she said, and with a "woman on a mission" stride led us around most of the outlet. We walked past computer peripherals, stationery, chocolate, illuminated world globes and pretty gift boxes to put things in until we found a single rack of long-forgotten paperbacks on a shelf below the boxed set of *Hale & Pace Outtakes Volumes 1-8* and *The Very Best of Little and Large*, which Bowden said was an oxymoron.

"Here we are!" she said, wiping away the cobwebs and dust. "I suppose we must have the full collection of every book ever written!"

"Very nearly," I replied. "Thanks for your help."

And that was how I found myself in an Acme van with Spike, who had been coerced by Bowden to do an honest day's carpeting in exchange for a week's washing for him and Betty. I hadn't been out on the road with Spike for a number of years, either for the weird shit we used to do from time to time or for any carpet-related work, so he was particularly talkative. As we drove to our first installation, he told me about a recent assignment.

"...so I says to him, 'Yo, Dracula! Have you come to watch the eclipse with us?' You should have seen his face. He was back in his coffin quicker than shit from a goose, and then when he heard us laughing, he came back out and said with his arms folded, 'I suppose you think that's funny?' and I said that I thought it *was* perhaps the funniest thing I'd seen for years, especially since he'd tripped and fallen headfirst into his coffin, and then he got all shitty and tried to bite me, so I rammed a sharpened stake through his heart and struck his head from his body."

He laughed and shook his head. "Oh, man, did *that* crease us up."

"My amusement might have ended with the sharpened-stake thing," I confessed, "but I like the idea of Dracula falling flat on his face."

"He did that a lot. Clumsy as hell. That biting-the-neck

thing? He was going for the *breast* and missed. Now he pretends that's what he was aiming for all along. Jerk. Is this number eight?"

It was. We parked, got out and knocked at the door.

"Major Pickles?" said Spike as a very elderly man with a pleasant expression answered the door. He was small and slender and in good health. His snow white hair was immaculately combed, a pencil mustache graced his upper lip, and he was wearing a blazer with a regimental badge sewn on the breast.

"Yes?"

"Good morning. We're from Acme Carpets."

"Jolly good!" said Major Pickles, who hobbled into the house and ushered us to a room that was devoid of any sort of floor covering. "It's to go down there," he said, pointing at the floor.

"Right," said Spike, who I could tell was in a mischievous mood. "My associate here will begin carpeting operations while I view the selection of tea and cookies on offer. Thursday--the carpet."

I sighed and surveyed the room, which was decorated with stripy green wallpaper and framed pictures of Major Pickles's notable war time achievements--it looked as if he'd been quite a formidable soldier. It seemed a shame that he was in a rather miserable house in one of the more rundown areas of Swindon. On the plus side, at least he was getting a new carpet. I went to the van and brought in the toolbox, vacuum cleaner, grippers and a nail gun. I was just putting on my knee pads when Spike and Pickles came back into the room.

"Jaffa cakes!" exclaimed Major Pickles, placing a tray on the windowsill. "Mr. Stoker here said that you were allergic to anything without chocolate on it."

"You're very kind to indulge my partner's bizarre and somewhat disrespectful sense of humor," I said. "Thank you."

"Well," he said in a kindly manner, "I'll leave you to get along, then."

And he tottered out the door. As soon as he had gone, Spike leaned close to me and said, "Did you see that?!"

"See what?"

He opened the door a crack and pointed at Pickles, who was

limping down the corridor to the kitchen. "His *feet*."

I looked, and the hair on the back of my neck rose. There was a reason Major Pickles was hobbling--just visible beneath the hems of his trouser legs were *hooves*.

"Right," said Spike as I looked up at him. "The cloven one."

"Major Pickles is the *devil*?"

"*Nah!*" said Spike, sniggering as if I were a simpleton. "If that was Mephistopheles, you'd *really* know about it. Firstly, the air would be thick with the choking stench of brimstone and decay, and we'd be knee-deep in the departed souls of the damned, writhing in perpetual agony as their bodies were repeatedly pierced with the barbed spears of the tormentors. And secondly, we'd never have got Jaffa cakes. Probably rich tea or graham crackers."

"Yeah, I hate them, too. But listen, if not Satan, then who?"

Spike closed the door carefully. "A demi-devil or Junior demon or something, sent to precipitate mankind's fall into the eternal river of effluent that is the bowels of hell. Let's see if we can't get a make on this guy. Have a look in the backyard and tell me if you see anything unusual."

I peered out the window as Spike looked around the room.

"I can see the old carpet piled up in the carport," I said, "and an almost-brand-new washing machine."

"How does the carpet look?"

"It seems perfect."

"Figures. Look here."

He pointed to an old cookie jar that was sitting on the mantelpiece. The lid was half off, and clearly visible inside was a wad of banknotes.

"Bingo!" said Spike, drawing out the hefty wad. They were all fifty-pound notes--easily a grand. "This is demi-demon Raum, if I'm not mistaken. He tempts men to eternal damnation by the sin of theft."

"Come on!" I said, mildly skeptical. "If Lucifer has everyone that had stolen something, he'd have more souls than he'd know what to deal with."

"You're right," agreed Spike. "The parameters of sin have become blurred over the years. A theft worthy of damnation has to be deceitful, cowardly and *loathsome*--like from a



charming and defenseless pensioner war veteran. So what Raum does is stash the real Major Pickles in a closet somewhere, assume his form, leaves the cash in plain sight, and some poor boob chances his luck. He counts his blessings, has a good few evenings out and forgets all about it until Judgment Day. And then--*shazam!* He's having his eyeballs gouged out with a spoon. And then again. And again...and *again.*"

"I...get the picture. So this Raum guy's a big deal, right?"

"Nah--pretty much a small-timer," said Spike, replacing the money. "First sphere, tenth throne--any lower and he'd be in the second hierarchy and confined to hell rather than doing the cushy number up here, harvesting souls for Lucifer and attempting to engineer the fall of man."

"Is there a lot of this about?" I asked. "Demons, I mean--hanging around ready to tempt us?"

Spike shrugged. "In Swindon? No. And there'll be one less if I can do anything about it."

He flipped open his cell phone and dialed a number, then pointed at the floor. "You better get those grippers down if we're to finish by lunchtime. I'm kidding. He doesn't want a carpet; we're only here to be tempted--remember all that stuff in the backyard? Hi, Betty? It's Dad. I've got a five-five in progress with a tenth-throner name of Raum. Will you have a look in Wheatley's and see how to cast him out? Thanks." He paused for a moment, looked at me and added, "Perhaps it wasn't Felix8 at all. Perhaps he was...*Felix9*. After all, the linking factor between the Felixes was only ever his face, yes?"

"Good point," I said, wondering quite how Spike might be so relaxed about the whole demon thing that he could be thinking about the Felix problem at the same time.

"Betty?" said Spike into his phone. "I'm still here.... Cold steel? No problem. Have you done your homework?...Well, you'd better get started. One more thing: Bowden said he'd do the washing for us, so get all the curtains down.... Love you, too. Bye."

He snapped his phone shut and looked around the room for something made of steel. He picked up the nail gun, muttered, "Damn, galvanized" then rummaged in the toolbox. The best

he could find was a long screwdriver, but he rejected this because it was chrome-plated.

"Can't we just go away and deal with Raum later?"

"Doesn't work like that," he said, peering out the window to see if there was anything steel within reach, which there wasn't. "We deal with this clown right now or not at all."

He opened the door a crack and peeked out.

"Okay, he's in the front room. Here's the plan: You gain his attention while I go into the kitchen and find something made of steel. Then I send him back to the second sphere."

"What if you're mistaken?" I asked. "He might be suffering from some--I don't know--rare genetic disorder that makes him grow hooves."

Spike fixed me with a piercing stare. "Have you even *heard* of such a thing?"

"No."

"Then let's do it. I hope there's a Sabatier or a tire iron or something--it'll be a pretty messy job with an eggbeater."

So while Spike slipped into the kitchen, I went to the door of the front room where Major Pickles was watching TV. He was seated on a floral-patterned settee with a cup of tea and a slice of fruitcake on a table nearby.

"Hello, young lady," he said amiably. "Done already?"

"No," I said, trying to appear unflustered, "but we're going to use the nail gun, and it might make some noise."

"Oh, that's quite all right," he said. "I was at Tobruk, you know."

"Really? What was it like?"

"My dear girl, the *noise*--and you couldn't get a decent drink anywhere."

"So a nail gun is no problem?"

"Nostalgic, my dear--fire away."

Spike hadn't yet reappeared, so I carried on. "Good. Right, well--Hey, is that *Bedazzled* you're watching?"

"Yes," he replied, "the Brendan Fraser version--*such* a broad head, but very funny."

"I met him once," I said, stalling for time, "at the launch party for the *Eyre Affair* movie. He played the part of--"

"Thursday?"

It was Spike, calling from the kitchen. I smiled and said to Major Pickles, "Would you excuse me for just one moment?"

Pickles nodded politely, and I walked to the kitchen, which was, strangely enough, empty. Not a sign of Spike anywhere. It had two doors, and the only other entrance, the back door, had a broom leaned up against it. I was about to open the fridge to look for him when I heard a voice.

"I'm up here."

I glanced up. Spike was pinned to the ceiling with thirty or so knives, scissors and other sharp objects, all stuck through the periphery of his clothing and making him look like the victim of an overenthusiastic circus knife thrower.

"What are you doing?" I hissed. "We're supposed to be dealing with the Raum guy."

"What am I *doing*? Oh, just admiring the view--why, what do you *think* I'm doing?"

I shrugged.

"Thursday," added Spike in a quiet voice, "I think he's on to us."

I turned to the door and jumped in fright because Major Pickles had crept up without my realizing. But it wasn't the little old gent I'd seen a few moments ago; this Pickles had two large horns sticking out of his head, yellow eyes like a cat's, and he was dressed in a loincloth. He was lean and muscular and had shiny, bright red skin--a bit like those ducks that hang in Chinese-restaurant windows. He also smelled strongly of sewage.

"Well," said Raum in a guttural, rasping voice that sounded like a box of rusty nails, "Thursday Next. What a surprise!" He looked up. "And Mr. Stoker, I presume--believe me, you are very unpopular from where I come from!"

I made a move to thump him, but he was too quick, and a moment later I was thrown to the ceiling with a force so hard it cracked the plaster. I didn't drop; I was held, face pointing down, not by any knives or scissors but the action of an unearthly force that felt as if I were being sat upon by a small walrus.



**"Thursday," added Spike in a quiet voice, "I think he's onto us."**

"Two unsullied souls," growled Raum sadly. "To His Infernal Majesty, *worthless*."

"I'm warning you," said Spike in a masterful display of misplaced optimism, "give yourself up and I'll not be too hard on you."

"SILENCE!" roared Raum, so loudly that two of the kitchen windows shattered. He laughed a deep, demonic cackle, then carried on. "Just so this morning hasn't been a complete waste, I am prepared to offer a deal: Either you both die in an exceptionally painful manner and I relinquish all rights to your souls, or one of you gives yourself to me--and I free the other!"

"How about a game of chess?" suggested Spike.

"Oh, no!" said Raum, wagging a reproachful finger. "We don't fall for *that* one anymore. Now, who's it going to be?"

"You can take me," said Spike.

"No!" I cried, but Raum merely laughed. He laughed long and loud. He laughed again. Then some more. He laughed so long, in fact, that Spike and I looked at each other. But still Raum laughed. The plates and cups smashed on the dresser, and glasses that were upside down on the drainer broke into smithereens. More laughter. Louder, longer, harder, until suddenly and quite without warning he exploded into a million tiny fragments that filled the small kitchen like a red mist. Released from the ceiling, I fell to the floor via the kitchen table, which was luckily a bit frail and had nothing on it. I was slightly dazed but got up to see...the *real* Major Pickles, standing where Raum had been, still holding the steel bayonet that had dispatched the demon back to hell.

"Hah!" said the elderly little gent with an aggressive twinkle in his eye. "They don't like the taste of cold steel up 'em!"

He had several days of stubble and was dressed in torn pajamas and covered in soil.

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

"He thought he could keep me prisoner in the garden shed," replied the pensioner resolutely, "but it was only fifteen yards nornoreast under the patio to the geranium bed."

"You dug your way out?"

"Yes, and would have been quicker, too, if I'd had a soup spoon instead of this."

He showed me a very worn and bent teaspoon.

"Or a spade?" I ventured.

"Hah!" he snorted contemptuously. "Spades are for losers." He looked up and noticed Spike. "I say, you there, sir--get off my ceiling this minute."

"Nothing I'd like better."

So we got Spike down and explained as best we could to the sprightly nonagenarian just who Raum was, something that he seemed to have very little trouble understanding.

"Good Lord, man!" he said at last. "You mean I killed a demon? There's a notch for the cricket bat, and no mistake."

"Sadly, no," replied Spike. "You just relegated him to the second sphere--he'll not reappear on earth for a decade or two and will get a serious lashing from the Dark One into the bargain."

"Better than he deserves," replied Major Pickles, checking the cookie jar. "The rotten blighter has pigged all my Jaffa cakes."

"Spike," I said, pointing at a desk diary I'd found on the counter, "we're not the only people who have had an appointment this morning."

He and Major Pickles bent over to have a look, and there it was. This morning was the first of three days of soul entrapment that Raum had planned for the house-call professionals of Swindon, and we had been the third potential damnees. The first, an electrician, Raum had crossed out and made a note: "sickeningly pleasant." The next, however, was for a new washing machine, and Raum had made three checks next to the name of the company: Wessex Kitchens. I rummaged through the papers on the counter-top and found a job sheet--the workman had been someone called Hans Towwel.

"Blast!" said Spike. "I *hate* it when Satan obtains a soul. Don't get me wrong, some people deserve to be tortured for all eternity, but damnation without the possibility of salvation--it's like a three-strike life sentence without the possibility of parole."

I nodded in agreement. Obscene though the crime was, eternal damnation was several punishments too far.

"All this defeatist claptrap is making me sick to the craw," growled Major Pickles. "No one is going to hell on my account--what happens if we get the money back?"

Spike snapped his fingers.

"Pickles, you're a genius! Mr. Towwel doesn't join the legion of the damned until he actually makes use of his ill-gotten gains. Thursday, call Wessex Kitchens and find out where he is--we need to get to him before he spends any of the cash."

Ten minutes later we were heading at high speed toward the Greasy Monk, a popular medieval-themed eatery not far from the rebuilt cathedral of St. Zvlkx. I had tried to call Towwel's cell phone, but it was switched off, and when I explained that there was a substantial sum of money missing from Major Pickles's house, the boss of Wessex Kitchens said he was horrified--and promised to meet us there.

The restaurant was filled to capacity, as the cathedral of St. Zvlkx had just been nominated as the first GSD drop-around-if-you-want-but-hey-no-one's-forcing-you place of worship/contemplation/meditation, and the many followers/adherents/vaguely interested parties of the single unified faith were having lunch and discussing ways in which they could best use the new multi-faith for overwhelming good.

As soon as we pushed open the doors Spike yelled, "Hans Towwel?" in his most commanding voice, and in the silence that followed, a man in a navy blue coverall signaled to us from behind a wooden plate of bread and dripping.

"Problems?" he said as we walked up.

"Could be," said Spike. "Did you pay for that meal with the money you pinched from Major Pickles?"

"Did I what?"

"You heard him," I said. "Did you pay for that meal with the money you stole from Major Pickles?"

"Ballocks to you!" he said, getting up. Spike, who was pretty strong, pushed the man hard back down into his seat.

"Listen," said Spike in a quiet voice, "we're not cops, and we don't give a shit about the money, and we don't give a shit about you--but we do give a shit about your *soul*. Now, just

tell us: Have you spent any of the cash or not?"

"That's well sweet, isn't it?" growled Towwel. "Some cash is missing so you blame the workingman."

"Towwel?" said a crumpled and untidy-looking man in a crumpled and untidy-looking suit, who had just arrived. "Is what they say true?"

"Who are you?" asked Spike.

"Mr. Hedge Moulting of Wessex Kitchens," said the untidy man, offering us a business card. "I must say I am shocked and appalled by our employee's behavior--how much was taken?"

"Now, look here!" said Towwel, growing angrier by the second, which caused Mr. Moulting of Wessex Kitchens to flinch and hide behind Spike. "I don't steal from people. Not from customers, not from pensioners, not from you, not from *anyone*!"

"You should be ashamed of yourself!" said Moulting, still half hidden behind Spike. "You're *fired*--and don't expect a reference."

"How do we know *you* didn't take it?" demanded Towwel.

"Me?" exclaimed Moulting. "How dare you!"

"*you* made a random inspection of my work this morning, and you're a sleazy piece of crap--I say *you* took it."

"An outrageous accusation!" yelled Moulting, waving a threatening finger in Towwel's direction. "You'll never install a washing machine in this town again, and what's more I will make it my duty--nay, pleasure--to see you convicted of this heinous crime. A thousand pounds? From a *war veteran*? You deserve all you're going to get!"

There was silence for a moment.

"Mr. Moulting," said Spike, "we never said how much was stolen. As I said to Mr. Towwel here, we don't give a shit about the money. We're here to save a soul from the torment of eternal damnation. It was a diabolical entrapment from one of Old Scratch's accomplices. If you've got the money and haven't spent any of it, then just drop it in the nearest poor box, and your soul is clear. If you *have* spent some of the cash, then there's nothing anyone can do for you."

I turned to Mr. Towwel. "Sorry to have accused you unjustly, sir. If you need a job, call me anytime at Acme Carpets."



And we walked out, bumping aside Moulting as we went. His shaking hand reached for a chair back to steady himself. He had turned pale and was sweating, trembling with the fear of the man who is condemned to eternal hellfire and knows it.

We recarpeted Major Pickles's entire house with the finest carpet we had. We also did his shopping, his washing and bought him two dozen packets of Jaffa cakes. After that, the three of us sat down and nattered all afternoon, drinking tea and telling stories. We parted the best of friends and left our phone numbers on his fridge so he could call us if he needed anything. I even suggested he give Polly a call if he wanted some company.

"I never realized carpet laying could be so much fun," I said as we finally drove away.

"Me neither," replied Spike. "Do you think Bowden will be pissed off that we've done this one for free and it took us all day?"

"Nah," I replied with a smile, "I'm sure he'll be just fine about it."

## Time Out of Joint

I never did get my head around time's carefree propensity to paradox. My father didn't exist, yet I was still born, and time travel had never been invented, but they still hoped that it might. There were currently two versions of Friday, and I had met him several times in the past--or was it the future? It gave me a dull ache in the head when I thought about it.

"How was work?" asked Landen when I walked in the door.

"Quite good fun," I replied. "The floor-covering business is definitely looking up. How are things with you?"

"Good, too--lots of work done."

"On *The Mews of Doom*?" I asked, still hopeful about Scampton-Tappett and remembering that I had sent a note down to *Bananas for Edward* for him to swap books. He'd cost me a thousand book-guineas, and I was sure as hell going to get my money's worth.

"No. I've been working on Spike's weird-shit self-help book: *Collecting the Undead*."

Damn and blast again.

I recalled a news item I had overheard on the tram home.

"Hey, do you know what Redmond van de Poste's Address to the Nation is all about?"

"Rumor says it's going to be about the stupidity surplus. Apparently his top advisers have come up with a plan that will deal with the excess in a manner that won't damage economic interests and might actually generate new business opportunities."

"He'll top the ratings with that one--I only hope he doesn't generate more stupidity. You know how stupidity tends to breed off itself. How are the girls?"

"They're fine. I'm just playing Scrabble with Tuesday. Is it cheating for her to use Nextian Geometry to bridge *two* triple-word scores with a word of only six letters?"

"I suppose. Where's Jenny?"

"She's made a camp in the attic."

"Again?"

Something niggled in my head once more. Something I was meant to do. "Land?"

"Yuh?"

"Nothing. I'll get it."

There was someone at the door, and whoever it was had knocked, rather than rung, which is always mildly ominous. I opened the door, and it was Friday, or at least it was the clean-cut, nongrunty version. He wasn't alone either--he had two of his ChronoGuard friends with him, and they all looked a bit serious. Despite the dapper light blue ChronoGuard uniforms, they all looked too young to get drunk or vote, let alone do something as awesomely responsible as surf the timestream. It was like letting a twelve-year-old do your epidural.

"Hello, Sweetpea!" I said. "Are these your friends?"

"They're *colleagues*," said Friday in a pointed fashion. "We're here on official business."

"Goodness!" I said, attempting not to patronize him with motherly pride and failing spectacularly. "Would you all like a glass of milk and a cookie or something?"

But Friday, it seemed, wasn't in much of a mood for milk--or a cookie.

"Not now, Mum. There's only forty-eight hours of time left, and we *still* haven't invented time travel."

"Maybe you can't," I replied. "Maybe it's impossible."

"We used the technology to get here," said Friday with impeccable logic, "so the possibility still exists, no matter how slight. We've got every available agent strung out across the timestream doing a fingertip search of all potential areas of discovery. Now, where is he?"

"Your father?"

"No, *him*. Friday--the other me."

"Don't you know? Isn't this all ancient history?"

"Time is not as it should be. If it were, we'd have solved it all by now. So where is he?"

"Are you here to replace him?"

"No, we just want to talk."

"He's out practicing with his band."

"He is *not*. Would it surprise you to learn that there was no band called the Gobshites?"

"Oh, no!" I said with a shudder. "He didn't call it the Wankers after all, did he?"

"No, no, Mum--*there is no band*."

"He's definitely doing his band thing," I assured him, inviting them in and picking the telephone off the hall table. "I'll call Toby's dad. They use their garage for practice. It's the perfect venue--both Toby's parents are partially deaf."

"Then there's not much point in phoning them, now, is there?" said the cockier of Friday's friends.

"What's your name?"

"Nigel," said the one who had spoken, a bit sheepishly.

"No one likes a smart-ass, Nigel."

I stared at him, and he looked away, pretending to find some fluff on his uniform.

"Hi, is that Toby's dad?" I said as the phone connected. "It's Friday's mum here.... No, I'm not like that--it only happens in the book. My question is: Are the boys jamming in your garage?"

I looked at Friday and his friends.

"Not for at least three months? I didn't know that. Thank you. Good night."

I put the phone down.

"So where is he?" I asked.

"We don't know," replied the other Friday, "and since he's a free radical whose movements are entirely independent of the SHE, we have no way of knowing where or when he is. The feckless, dopey, teenage act was a good one and had us all fooled--you especially."

I narrowed my eyes. This was a surprising development. "What are you saying?"

"We've had some new information, and we think Friday might be actually *causing* the nondiscovery of the technology--conspiring with his future self to overthrow the ChronoGuard!"

"Sounds like a trumped-up bullshit charge for you to replace him," I said, beginning to get annoyed.

"I'm serious, Mum. Friday is a dangerous historical fundamentalist who will do what ever it takes to achieve his own narrow agenda--to keep time as it was originally meant to run. If we don't stop him, then the whole of history will roll up and there'll be nothing left of any of us!"

"If he's so dangerous," I said slowly, "then why haven't you eradicated him?"

Friday took a deep breath. "Mum? Like...*duh*. He's a younger version of me and the future director-general. If we get rid of him, we get rid of ourselves. He's clever, I'll grant him that. But if he can stop time travel from being discovered, then he knows how it was invented in the first place. We need to speak to him. Now--where is he?"

"I don't rat out my son, son," I said in a mildly confusing way.

"*I'm* your son, Mum."

"And I wouldn't rat you out either, Sweetpea."

Friday took a step forward and raised his voice a notch. "Mum, this is important. If you have any idea where he is, then you're going to have to tell us--and don't call me Sweetpea in front of my friends."

"I don't know where he is--Sweetpea--and if you want to talk to me in that tone of voice, you'll go to your room."

"This is beyond room, Mother."

"Mum. It's *Mum*. Friday always calls me Mum."

"I'm Friday, Mum--*your* Friday."

"No," I said, "you're *another* Friday--someone he *might* become. And do you know, I think I prefer the one who can barely talk and thinks soap is a type of TV show?"

Friday glared at me angrily. "You've got ten hours to hand him over. Harboring a time terrorist is a serious offense, and the punishment unspeakably unpleasant."

I wasn't fazed by his threats.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" I asked.

"Of course!"

"Then, by definition, *so does he*. Why don't you take your SO-12 buddies and go play in the timestream until dinner?"

Friday made a harrumph noise, turned on his heels and departed, with his friends following quickly behind.

I closed the door and walked through to the hall where Landen was leaning on the newel post staring at me. He'd been listening to every word.

"Pumpkin, just what the hell's going on?"

"I'm not sure myself, darling, but I'm beginning to think that Friday's been making monkeys out of the pair of us."

"Which Friday?"

"The hairy one that grunts a lot. He's not a dozy slacker after all--he's working undercover as some sort of historical fundamentalist. We need some answers, and I think I know where to find them. Friday may have tricked his parents, the SHE and half the ChronoGuard, but there's one person no teenage boy ever managed to fool."

"And that is?"

"His younger sister."

"I can't believe it took you so long to figure out," said Tuesday, who agreed to spill the beans on her brother for the bargain price of a new bicycle, a thirty-pound gift card to MathWorld and lasagna three nights in a row. "He didn't stomp on Barney Plotz either--he forged the letters and the phone call. He needed the time to conduct what he called his...investigations. I don't know what they were, but he was at the public library a lot--and over at Gran's."

"Gran's? Why Gran's? He *likes* his food."

"I don't know," said Tuesday, thinking long and hard about it. "He said it was something to do with Mycroft and a chronuption of staggering proportions."

"That boy," I muttered grimly, "has got some serious explaining to do."

## Now Is the Winter

One of the biggest wastes of money in recent years was the Anti-Smite shield, designed to protect mankind (or Britain, at the very least) from an overzealous deity eager to cleanse the population of sin. Funded initially by Chancellor Yorrick Kaine, the project was halted after his ignominious fall from grace. Canceled but not forgotten, the network of transmission towers still lies dotted about the country, a silent testament to Kaine's erratic and somewhat costly administration.

My mother answered the door when we knocked, and she seemed vaguely surprised to see us all. Landen and I were there as concerned parents, of course, and Tuesday was there as she was the only one who might be able to understand Mycroft's work, if that was what was required.

"Is it Sunday lunchtime already?" asked my mother.

"No, Mother. Is Friday here?"

"Friday? Goodness me, no! I haven't seen him for over--"

"It's all right, Gran," came a familiar voice from the living-room door. "There's no more call for subterfuge."

"It was Friday--*our* Friday, the grunty, smelly one, who up until an hour ago was someone we thought wouldn't know what "subterfuge" meant, let alone be able to pronounce it. He had changed. There seemed to be a much more upright bearing about him. Perhaps it was because he wasn't dragging his feet when he walked, and he actually looked at us when he spoke. Despite this, he still *seemed* like a sad-teenager cliché: spots, long unkempt hair, and with clothes so baggy you could dress three people out of the material and still have enough to make some curtains.

"Why don't you tell us what's going on?" I asked.

"You wouldn't understand."

I fixed him with my best "Son, you are in so much trouble" look. "You'd be amazed what I can understand."

"Okay," he said, drawing a deep breath. "You've heard that the ChronoGuard is using time-travel technology now in the almost certain knowledge that it's invented in the future?"

"I get the *principle*," I replied somewhat guardedly, as I still had no idea how you could use something that had yet to be invented.

"As weird as it might seem," explained Friday, "the principle is sound. Many things happen solely because of the curious human foible of a preconceived notion's altering the outcome. More simply put: If we convince ourselves that something is possible, it becomes so. It's called the *Schrodinger Night Fever* principle."

"I don't understand."

"It's simple. If you go to see *Saturday Night Fever* expecting it to be good, it's a corker. However, if you go *expecting* it to be a crock of shit, it's that, too. Thus *Saturday Night Fever* can exist in two mutually opposing states *at the very same time*, yet only by the weight of our expectations. From this principle we can deduce that *any* opposing states can be governed by human expectation--even, as in the case of retro-deficit-engineering, the present use of a future technology."

"I *think* I understand that," said Landen. "Does it work with *any* John Travolta movie?"

"Only the artistically ambiguous ones," replied Friday, "such as *Pulp Fiction* and *Face/Off*. *Battlefield Earth* doesn't work, because it's a stinker no matter how much you think you're going to like it, and *Get Shorty* doesn't work either, because you'd be hard-pressed not to enjoy it, irrespective of any preconceived notions."

"It's a beautiful principle," I said admiringly. "Yours?"

"Sadly not," replied Friday with a smile. "Much as I'd like to claim it, the credit belongs to an intellect far superior to mine--Tuesday. Way to go, sis."

Tuesday squirmed with joy at getting a compliment from her big brother, but still none of it made any real sense.

"So how does this relate to Mycroft and time travel?"

"Simple," said Friday. "The obscenely complex technologies that the ChronoGuard uses to power up the time engines contravene one essential premise that is at the very core of



science: that disorder will always stay the same or increase. More simply stated, you can put a pig in a machine to make a sausage, but you can't put a sausage in a machine to make a pig. It's the Second Law of Thermodynamics. One of the most rigid tenets of our understanding of the physical world. You can't reverse the arrow of time to make something *unhappen*--whether it be unscrambling eggs or unmaking a historical event."

"The recipe for unscrambled eggs," I murmured, suddenly remembering a family dinner we had about the time of the *Jane Eyre* episode. "He was scribbling it on a napkin, and Polly made him stop. They had an argument--that's how I remember it."

"Right," said Friday. "The recipe was actually an equation that showed how the Second Law of Thermodynamics could be modified to allow a reversibility of time's arrow. That you *could* unbake a cake with almost breathless simplicity. The recipe for unscrambled eggs is at the heart of reversing the flow of time--without it, *there is no time travel!*"

"So," I said slowly, "the whole of the ChronoGuard's ability to move around in time rests on their getting hold of this recipe?"

"That's about the tune of it, Mum."

"So where is it?" asked Landen. "Logically, it *must* still exist, or the likelihood of time travel drops to zero. Since your future self just popped up twenty minutes ago to make veiled threats, the possibility remains that it will be discovered sometime before the End of Time--sometime in the next forty-eight hours."

"Right," said Friday, "and that's what I've been doing with Polly for the past two weeks--trying to find where Mycroft put it. Once I've got the recipe, I can destroy it: The possibility of time travel drops to zero, and it's good night, Vienna, for the ChronoGuard."

"Why would you want that?"

"The less you know, Mum, the better."

"They say you're a dangerous historical fundamentalist," I added cautiously. "A terrorist of time."

"But they would say that, wouldn't they? The Friday you

met--he's okay. He's following orders, but he doesn't know what I know. If he did, he'd be trying to destroy the recipe, the same as me. The Standard History Eventline is bullshit, and all they're doing is trying to protect their temporal-phony-baloney jobs."

"How do you know this?"

"I become director-general of the ChronoGuard when I'm thirty-six. In the final year before retirement, at seventy-eight, I'm inducted into the ChronoGuard Star Chamber--the ruling elite. It was there that I discovered something so devastating that if it became public knowledge would shut down the industry in an instant. And the time business is worth six hundred billion a year--*minimum*."

"Tell them what it is," said Polly, who'd been standing at his side. "If anything happens to you, then at least one of us might be able to carry on."

Friday nodded and took a deep breath. "Has anyone noticed how short attention spans seem to have cast a certain lassitude across the nation?"

"Do I ever," I replied, rolling my eyes and thinking of the endlessly downward clicking of the Read-O-Meter. "No one's reading books anymore. They seem to prefer the mind-numbing spectacle of easily digested trash TV and celebrity tittle-tattle."

"Exactly," said Friday. "The long view has been eroded. We can't see beyond six months, if that, and short-termism will spell our end. But the thing is, it needn't be that way--there's a *reason* for it. The time engines don't just need vast quantities of power--they need to run on time. Not punctuality, but time *itself*. Even a temporal leap of a few minutes will use up an infinitesimally small amount of the abstract concept. Not the hard *clock* time but the soft stuff that keeps events firmly embedded in a small cocoon of prolonged event--the *Now*."

"Oooh!" murmured Tuesday, who twigged it first. "*They've been mining the Now!*"

"Exactly, sis," said Friday, sweeping the hair from his eyes. "The Short Now is the direct result of the time industry's unthinking depredations. If the ChronoGuard continues as it is, within a few years there won't be any Now at all, and the

world will move into a Dark Age of eternal indifference."

"You mean TV could get *worse*?" asked Landen.

"*Much* worse," replied Friday grimly. "At the rate the Now is being eroded, by this time next year *Samaritan Kidney Swap* will be considered the height of scholarly erudition. But easily digestible TV is not the cause--it's the effect. A Short Now will also spell the gradual collapse of forward planning, and mankind will slowly strangle itself in a downward spiral of uncaring self-interest and short-term instant gratification."

There was a bleak silence as we took this on board. We could see it all now. Short attention spans, a general malaise, no tolerance, no respect, no rules. Short-termism. No wonder we were seeing Outlander ReadRates go into free fall. The Short Now would hate books; too much thought required for not enough gratification. It brought home the urgency to find the recipe, wherever it was: Without unscrambled eggs, there was no time travel, no more depredation of the Now, and we could look to a brighter future of long-term thought--and more reading. Simple.

"Shouldn't this be a matter for public debate?" asked Landen.

"What would that achieve, Dad? The ChronoGuard doesn't have to *disprove* that the reduction of the Now is caused by humans--they only have to create doubt. They'll always be Short Now deniers, and the debate will become so long and drawn out that as soon as we realize there *is* a problem, we won't care enough to want to do anything about it. This issue is not for debate--the ChronoGuard *cannot* get hold of that recipe. I'm staking my career on it. And believe me, I would have had an excellent career to stake."

There was silence after Friday's speech. We all realized that he was right, of course, but I was also thinking about how proud I was of him and how refreshing it was to hear such eloquence and moral lucidity from such a grubby and disheveled individual who was wearing a WAYNE SKUNK IS THE BALLOCKS T-shirt.

Polly sighed, breaking the silence. "If only Mycroft were alive. we could ask him where he put it."

And then I *understood*.

"Aunt," I said, "come with me. Friday--you, too."

It was dusk by now, and the last rays of evening light were shining through the dusty windows of Mycroft's workshop. It seemed somehow shabbier in the twilight.

"All those memories!" breathed Polly, hobbling across the concrete floor with Friday holding her arm. "What a life. Yes indeed, what a life. I've not been in here since before he...you know."

"Don't be startled," I told her, "but I've seen Mycroft twice in here over the past two days. He came back to tell us something, and until now I had no idea what it was. Polly?"

Her eyes had filled with tears as she stared into the dim emptiness of the workshop. I followed her gaze, and as my eyes became accustomed to the light, I could see him, too. Mycroft's opacity was low, and the color seemed to have drained from his body. He was barely there at all.

"Hello, Poll," he said with a smile, his voice a low rumble. "You're looking positively *radiant*!"

"Oh, Crofty!" she murmured. "You're such a fibber--I'm a doddering wreck ready for the scrap heap. But one that has missed you so much!"

"Mycroft," I said in a respectful whisper, "I don't want to keep you from your wife, but time is short. I know why you came back."

"You mean it wasn't Farquitt or the chairs?"

"No. It was about the recipe for unscrambled eggs."

"We need to know," added Polly, "where you left it."

"Is that all?" laughed Mycroft. "Why, goodness--I put in my jacket pocket!"

He was beginning to fade, and his voice sounded hollow and empty. His post-life time was almost up.

"And *after* that?"

He faded some more. I was worried that if I blinked, he'd go completely.

"Which jacket, my darling?" asked Polly.

"The one you gave me for Christmas," came an ethereal whisper, "the blue one...with the large checks."

"Crofty?"

But he had vanished. Friday and I rushed to support Polly, who had gone a bit wobbly at the knees.

"Damn!" said Friday. "When does he next come back?"

"He doesn't," I said. "That was it."

"Then we're no closer to knowing where it is," said Friday. "I've been through all his clothes--there isn't one with blue checks in his closet."

"There's a reason for that," said Polly, her eyes glistening with tears. "He left it on the *Hesperus*. I scolded him at the time, but now I see why he did it."

"Mum? Does this make any sense to you?"

"Yes," I said with a smile. "It's somewhere the ChronoGuard can't get to it. Back in 1985, before he used the Prose Portal to send Polly into 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,' he tested it on himself. The jacket is right where he left it--in the teeth of an Atlantic gale inside Henry Longfellow's poem 'The Wreck of the Hesperus.'"

"Inside the *BookWorld*?"

"Right," I replied, "and nothing--repeat, *nothing*--would compel me to return there. In two days the ChronoGuard will be gone, and the slow repair of the Now can begin. You did good, Sweetpea."

"Thanks, Mum," he said, "but please--don't call me Sweetpea."

## Spending the Surplus

The Commonsense Party's first major policy reversal of perceived current wisdom was with the scrapping of performance targets, league standings and the attempt to make subtle human problems into figures on a graph that could be solved quickly and easily through "initiatives." Arguing that important bodies such as the Health Service should have the emphasis on care and not on administration, the Commonsense Party forced through legislation that essentially argued, "If it takes us ten years to get into the shit, it will take us twenty years to get out--and that journey starts *now*."

We stayed at Mum's for dinner, although "dinner" in this context might best be described as a loose collection of foodstuffs tossed randomly into a large saucepan and then boiled for as long as it took for all taste to vanish, never to return. Because of this we missed Redmond van de Poste's Address to the Nation, something that didn't really trouble us, as the last address had been, as they always were, unbelievably dreary but astute and of vital importance. It was just so good to talk to Friday again one-to-one. I'd forgotten how pleasant he actually was. He lost no time in telling me that he was going to have to stay undercover as a lazy good-for-nothing until the ChronoGuard had ceased operations--and this meant that I shouldn't even *attempt* to wake him until at least midday, or two on weekends.

"How convenient," I observed.

Tuesday had been thoughtful for some time and finally asked, "But can't the ChronoGuard go back to the time between when Great-Uncle Mycroft wrote the recipe and when he left it on the *Hesperus*?"

"Don't worry," said Friday with a wink. "It was only twenty-eight minutes, and the older me has it covered at the other

end. The only thing we have to do is make sure the recipe stays in 'The Wreck of the Hesperus.' We can win this fight with nothing more than inaction, which as a teenager suits me just fine."

It was only as we were driving home that I suddenly thought of Jenny.

"Oh, my God!" I said in a panic. "We left Jenny at home on her own!"

Landen took hold of my arm and squeezed it, and I felt Friday rest his hand on my shoulder.

"It's all right, darling, calm down," Landen soothed. "We left her with Mrs. Berko-Boyler."

I frowned. "No, we *didn't*. You said she was making a camp in the attic. We came straight out. How could we have forgotten?"

"Sweetheart," said Landen with a deep breath, "there is no Jenny."

"What do you you mean?" I demanded, chuckling at the stupidity of his comment. "Of course there's a Jenny!"

"Dad's right," said Friday soothingly. "There has never been a Jenny."

"But I can *remember* her!"

"It's *Aornis*, Mum," added Tuesday. "She gave you this mindworm seven years ago, and we can't get rid of it."

"I don't understand," I said beginning to panic. "I can remember everything about her! Her laugh, the holidays, the time she fell off her bicycle and broke her arm, her birth--*everything*!"

"Aornis did this to you for *revenge*," said Landen. "After she couldn't wipe me from your memory, she left you with this--that's what she's doing her forty-year stretch for."

"The bitch!" I yelled. "I'll kill her for this!"

"Language, Mum," said Tuesday. "I'm only twelve. Besides, even if you did kill her, we think Jenny would still be with you."

"Oh, *shit*," I said as reason started to replace confusion and anger. "That's why she never turns up at mealtimes."

"We pretend there *is* a Jenny to minimize the onset of an attack," said Landen. "It's why we keep her bedroom as it is

and why you'll find her stuff all around the house--so when you're alone, you don't go into a missing-daughter panic."

"The evil little cow!" I muttered, rubbing my face. "But now that I know, we can do something about it, right?"

"It's not as easy as that, sweetheart," said Landen with a note of sadness in his voice. "Aornis is truly vindictive--in a few minutes you won't remember any of this and you'll again believe that you have a daughter named Jenny."

"You mean," I said slowly, "I've done this before?"

We pulled up outside the house, and Landen turned off the engine. There was silence in the car.

"Sometimes you can go weeks without an attack," said Landen quietly. "At other times you can have two or three an hour."

"Is that why you work from home?"

"Yeah. We can't have you going to school every day expecting to pick up a daughter who isn't there."

"So...you've explained all this to me before?"

"Many times, darling."

I sighed deeply. "I feel like a complete twit," I said in a soft voice. "Is this my first attack today?"

"It's the third," said Landen. "It's been a bad week."

I looked at them all in turn, and they were all staring back at me with such a sense of loving concern for my well-being that I burst into tears.

"It's all right, Mum," said Tuesday, holding my hand. "We'll look after you."

"You are the best, most loving, supportive family anyone could ever have," I said through my sobs. "I'm so sorry if I'm a burden."

They all told me not to be so bloody silly, I told them not to swear, and Landen gave me his handkerchief for my tears.

"So," I said, wiping my eyes, "how does it work? How do I stop remembering the fact that there's no Jenny?"

"We have our ways. Jenny's at a sleepover with Ingrid. Okay?"

"Okay."

He leaned across and kissed me, smiled and said to the kids, "Right, team, do your stuff."



Friday poked Tuesday hard in the ribs, and she squealed, "What was *that* for!?"

"For being a geek!"

"I'd rather be a geek than a duh-brain. And what's more, Strontium Goat is rubbish and Wayne Skunk couldn't play a guitar if his life depended on it!"

"Say that again!"

"Will you two cut it out!" I said crossly. "Honestly, I think Friday's proved he's no duh-brain over the Short Now thing, so just pack it in. Right. I know your gran gave us some food, but does anybody want anything proper to eat?"

"There's some pizza in the freezer," said Landen. "We can have that."

We all got out of the car and walked up to the house with Friday and Tuesday bickering.

"Geek."

"Duh-brain."

"Geek."

"Duh-brain."

"I said *cut it out*." I suddenly thought of something. "Land, where's Jenny?"

"At a sleepover with Ingrid."

"Oh, yeah. Again?"

"Thick as thieves, those two."

"Yeah," I said with a frown, "thick as thieves, those two."

Bowden called during dinner. This was unusual for him, but not totally unexpected. Spike and I had crept away from Acme like naughty schoolkids, as we didn't want to get into trouble over the cost of Major Pickles's carpet, not to mention that it had taken us both all day and we'd done nothing else.

"It's not great, is it?" said Bowden in the overserious tone he used when he was annoyed, upset or angry. To be honest, I had the most shares in Acme, but he *was* the managing director, so day-to-day operations were up to him.

"I don't think it's all *that* bad," I said, going on the defensive.

"Are you insane?" replied Bowden. "It's a disaster!"

"We've had bigger problems," I said, beginning to get annoyed. "I think it's best to keep a sense of proportion, don't you?"

"Well, yes," he replied, "but if we let this sort of thing take a hold, you never know where it might end up."

I was pissed off now.

"Bowden," I said, "just cool it. Spike got stuck to the ceiling by Raum, and if Pickles hadn't given the demi-devil the cold steel, we'd both be pushing up daisies."

There was silence on the line for a moment, until Bowden said in a quiet voice, "I'm talking about van de Poste's Address to the Nation--what are *you* talking about?"

"Oh--nothing. What did he say?"

"Switch on the telly and you'll see."

I asked Tuesday to switch channels. OWL-TV was airing the popular current-affairs show *Fresh Air with Tudor Webastow*, and Tudor, who was perhaps not the best but certainly the tallest reporter on TV, was interviewing the Commonsense minister of culture, Cherie Yogert, MP.

"...and the first classic to be turned into a reality book show?"

"*Pride and Prejudice*," announced Yogert proudly. "It will be renamed *The Bennets* and will be serialized live in your household copy the day after tomorrow. Set in starchy early-nineteenth-century England, the series will feature Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and their five daughters being given tasks and then voted out of the house one by one, with the winner going on to feature in *Northanger Abbey*, which itself will be the subject of more 'readeractive' changes."

"So what van de Poste is sanctioning," remarked Webastow slowly, "is the wholesale plunder of everything the literary world holds dear."

"Not *everything*," corrected Ms. Yogert. "Only books penned by English authors. We don't have the right to do dumb things with other nations' books--they can do that for themselves. But," she went on, "I think 'plunder' would be too strong a word. We would prefer to obfuscate the issue by using nonsensical jargon such as 'market-led changes' or 'user-choice enhancements.' For centuries now, the classics have been dreary, overlong and incomprehensible to anyone without a university education. Reality book shows are the way forward, and the Interactive Book Council are the people to do it for

us!"

"Am I hearing this right?"

"Unfortunately," murmured Landen, who was standing next to me.

"We have been suffering under the yoke of the Stalinist principle of one-author books," continued Ms. Yogert, "and in the modern world we must strive to bring democracy to the writing process."

"I don't think any authors would regard their writing process as creative totalitarianism," said Webastow uneasily. "But we'll move on. As I understand it, the technology that will enable you to alter the story line of a book will change it permanently, and in every known copy. Do you not think it would be prudent to leave the originals as they are and write *alternative* versions?"

Yogert smiled at him patronizingly. "If we did that," she replied, "it would barely be stupid at all, and the Commonsense Party takes the stupidity surplus problem *extremely* seriously. Prime Minister van de Poste has pledged to not only reduce the current surplus to zero within a year but to also cut all idiocy emissions by seventy percent in 2020. This requires unpopular decisions, and he had to compare the interests of a few die-hard, elitist, tweeby, bespectacled book fans with those of the general voting public. Better still, because this idea is so idiotic that the loss of a single classic--say, *Jane Eyre*--will offset the entire nation's stupidity for an entire year. Since we have the potential to overwrite *all* the English classics to reader choice, we can do *really* stupid things with impunity. Who knows? We may even run a stupidity *deficit*--and can then afford to take on other nations' idiocy at huge national profit. We see the UK as leading the stupidity-offset-trading industry--and the idiocy of *that* idea will simply be offset against the annihilation of *Vanity Fair*. Simple, isn't it?"

I realized I was still holding the phone. "Bowden, are you there?"

"I'm here."

"This stinks to high heaven. Can you find out something about this so-called Interactive Book Council? I've never heard

of such a thing. Call me back."

I returned my attention to the TV.

"And when we've lost all the classics and the stupidity surplus has once again ballooned?" asked Webastow. "What happens then?"

"Well," said Ms. Yogert with a shrug, "we'll cross that bridge when we come to it, eh?"

"You'll forgive me for saying this," said Webastow, looking over his glasses, "but this is the most harebrained piece of unadulterated stupidity that any government has ever undertaken *anywhere*."

"Thank you very much," replied Ms. Yogert courteously. "I'll make sure your compliments are forwarded to Prime Minister van de Poste."

The program changed to a report on how the "interactive book" might work. Something about "new technologies" and "user-defined narrative." It was all baloney. I knew what was going on. It was Senator Jobsworth. He'd pushed through that interactive book project of Baxter's. Worse, he'd planned this all along--witness the large throughput conduits in *Pride and Prejudice* and the recent upgrading of all of Austen's work. I wasn't that concerned with how they'd managed to overturn my veto or even open an office in the real world--what worried me was that I needed to be in the Book-World to stop the nation's entire literary heritage from being sacrificed on the altar of popularism.

The phone rang. It was Bowden again. I made a trifling and wholly unbelievable excuse about looking for a hammer, then vanished into the garage so Landen couldn't hear the conversation.

"The Interactive Book Council is run out of an office in West London," Bowden reported when I was safely perched on the lawn mower. "It was incorporated a month ago and has the capacity to take a thousand simultaneous calls--yet the office itself is barely larger than the one at Acme."

"They must have figured a way to transfer the calls en masse to the BookWorld," I replied. "I'm sure a thousand Mrs. Danvers would be overjoyed to be working in a call center rather than bullying characters or dealing with rampant

misspellings."

I told Bowden I'd try to think of something and hung up. I stepped out of the garage and went back into the living room, my heart thumping. This was why I had the veto--to protect the BookWorld from the stupefyingly shortsighted decisions of the Council of Genres. But first things first. I had to contact Bradshaw and see what kind of reaction Jurisfiction was having to the wholesale slaughter of literary treasures--but how? JurisTech had never devised a two-way communication link between the Book-World and the Outland, as I was the only one ever likely to use it.

"Are you all right, Mum?" asked Tuesday.

"Yes, poppet, I'm fine," I said, tousling her hair. "I've just got to muse on this awhile."

I went upstairs to my office, which had been converted from the old box room, and sat down to think. The more I thought, the worse things looked. If the CofG had discounted my veto and forced the interactivity issue, it was entirely possible that they would also be attacking Speedy Muffler and Racy Novel. The only agency able to police these matters was Jurisfiction--but it worked to Text Grand Central's orders, which was *itself* under the control of the Council of Genres, so Jobsworth was ultimately in command of Jurisfiction--and he could do with it what he wanted.

I sighed, leaned forward and absently pulled out my hair tie, then rubbed at my scalp with my fingertips. Commander Bradshaw would never have agreed to this interactivity garbage and would resign out of principle--as he had hundreds of times before. And if I were there, I could reaffirm my veto. It was a right given me by the Great Panjandrum, and not even Jobsworth would go against *her* will. This was all well and good but for one thing: I'd never even *considered* the possibility of losing my TravelBook, so I'd never worked out an emergency strategy for getting into the BookWorld without it.

The only person I knew who could bookjump without a book was Mrs. Nakajima, and she was in retirement at Thornfield Hall. Ex-Jurisfiction agent Harris Tweed had been banished permanently to the Outland, and without his

TravelBook he was as marooned as I was. Ex-chancellor Yorrick Kaine, real these days and currently licking his wounds from a cell at Parkhurst, was no help at all, and neither was the only other fictionaut I knew still living, Cliff Hangar. I thought again about Commander Bradshaw. He'd certainly want to contact me and was a man of formidable resources--if *I* were him, how would I go about contacting someone in the real world? I checked my e-mails but found nothing and looked to see if I had any messages on my cell phone, which I hadn't. My mobilefootnoterphone, naturally, was devoid of a signal.

I leaned back in my chair to think more clearly and let my eyes wander around the room. I had a good collection of books, amassed during my long career as a Literary Detective. Major and minor classics, but little of any great value. I stopped and thought for a moment, then started to rummage through my bookshelf until I found what I was looking for--one of Commander Bradshaw's novels. Not one he wrote, of course, but one of the ones that *featured* him. There were twenty-three in the series, written between 1888 and 1922, and all featured Bradshaw either shooting large animals, finding lost civilizations or stopping "Johnny Foreigner" from causing mischief in British East Africa. He had been out of print for over sixty years and hadn't been read at all for more than ten. Since no one was reading him, he could say what he wanted in his own books, and I would be able to read what he said. But there were a few problems: one, that twenty-three books would take a lot of reading; two, that Text Grand Central would know if his books were being read; and three, that it was simply a one-way conduit, and if he *did* leave a message, he would never know if it was me who'd read it.

I opened *Two Years Amongst the Umpopo* and flicked through the pages to see if anything caught my eye, such as a double line space or something. It didn't, so I picked up *Tilapia, the Devil-Fish of Lake Rudolph* and, after that, *The Man-Eaters of Nakuru*. It was only while I was idly thumbing through *Bradshaw Defies the Kaiser* that I hit pay dirt. The text of the book remained unaltered, but the *dedication* had changed. Bradshaw was smart; only a variance in the *story* would be

noticed at Text Grand Central--they wouldn't know I was reading it at all. I took the book back to my desk and read:

Thursday, D'girl.

If you can read this, you have realized that something is seriously squiffy in the BookWorld. Plans had been afoot for weeks, and none of us had seen them. Thursday1-4 (yes, it's true) has taken your place as the CofG's LBOCS and is rubber-stamping all of Jobsworth's idiotic schemes. The interactivity idea is going ahead full speed, and even now Danverclones are massing on the borders of Racy Novel, ready to invade. Evil Thursday has loaded Text Grand Central with her toadies in order to keep a careful watch for any textual anomalies that might give them--and her--a clue as to whether you have returned. For it is this that Evil Thursday fears more than anything: *that you will return, unmask her as an impostor and retake your place*. She has suspended Jurisfiction and had all agents confined to their books, and she now commands a legion of Danverclones, who are waiting to capture you should you appear in the BookWorld. We stole back your TravelBook and have left it for you with Captain Carver inside *It Was a Dark and Stormy Night* if you can somehow find a way in. This dedication will self-erase in two readings. Good luck, old girl--and Melanie sends her love.

Bradshaw.

I read the dedication again and watched as the words slowly dissolved from the page. Good old Bradshaw. I had been to *It Was a Dark and Stormy Night* a couple of times, mostly for training. It was a maritime adventure set aboard a tramp steamer on the Tasman Sea in 1924. It was a good choice, because it came under the deregulated area of the library known as Vanity Publishing. Text Grand Central wouldn't even know I was there. I replaced *Bradshaw Defies the Kaiser* on the shelf, then unlocked the bottom drawer and took out my pistol and eraserhead cartridges. I stuffed them in my bag, noted that it was almost ten and knocked on Friday's door.

"Darling?"

He looked up from the copy of *Strontmania* he was reading.

"Yuh?"

"I'm sorry, Sweetpea, but I have to go back to the BookWorld. It may put the unscrambled-eggs recipe in jeopardy."

He sighed and stared at me. "I knew you would."

"How?"

He beckoned me to the window and pointed to three figures sitting on a wall opposite the house. "The one in the middle is the other me. It shows there is still a *chance* they'll get hold of the recipe. If we'd won, they'd be long gone."

"Don't worry," I said, laying a hand on his. "I know how important the length of the Now is to all of us. I won't go anywhere near 'The Wreck of the Hesperus.'"

"Mum," he said in a quiet voice, "if you get back home and I'm polite, well-mannered and with short hair, don't be too hard on me, eh?"

He was worried about being replaced.

"It won't come to that, Sweetpea. I'll defend your right to be smelly and uncommunicative...with my *life*."

We hugged and I said good-bye, then did the same to Tuesday, who was reading in bed, giggling over the risible imperfections of the Special Theory of Relativity. She knew I was going somewhere serious, so she got out of bed to give me an extra hug just in case. I hugged her back, tucked her in, told her not to make Einstein look *too* much of a clot in case it made her look cocky. I then went to say good-bye to Jenny and can remember doing so, although for some reason Friday and Tuesday picked that moment to argue about the brightness of the hall light. After sorting them out, I went downstairs to Landen.

"Land," I said, unsure of what to say, since I rarely got emergency call-outs for carpet laying, and to pretend I did now would be such an obvious lie, "you do know I love you?"

"More than you realize, sweetheart."

"And you trust me?"

"Of course."

"Good. I've got to go and--"



"Do some emergency carpet laying?"

I smiled. "Yeah. Wish me luck."

We hugged, I put on my jacket and left the house, hailing a cab to take me to the Clary-LaMarr Travelport. When I was safely on the bullet train to Saknussem, I took out my cell phone and keyed in a number. I stared out at the dark Wessex countryside that zipped past so fast the few streetlamps I could see were almost orange streaks. The call was picked up, and I paused, heart thumping, before speaking.

"My name's Thursday Next. I'd like to speak to John Henry Goliath. You're going to have to wake him. It's a matter of some importance."

## The *Austen Rover* Roving

The basis for the *Austen Rover*, I learned much later, was a bus that the Goliath Corporation had bought in 1952 to transport its employees to the coast on "works days out," a lamentable lapse in Goliath's otherwise fine record of rampant worker exploitation. The error was discovered after eight years and the day trips discontinued. True to form, Goliath docked the wages of all who attended and charged them for the trip--with back-dated interest.

The *Austen Rover* has two separate systems," explained Dr. Anne Wirthlass, "the transfictional propulsion unit and the book-navigation protocol. The former we have worked out--the latter is something you need to update us on."

It was almost noon of the following day, and I was being brought up to speed on the *Rover's* complexities by the brilliant Dr. Wirthlass, who had thanked me profusely for changing my mind so close to the time before they were to fire themselves off into the unknown.

"It was the least I could do," I replied, keeping the real reason to myself.

There had been an excited buzz among the technicians in the lab that morning, and I had been introduced to more specialists in an hour than I'd met in a lifetime. John Henry Goliath himself was on hand to smooth over any problems we might have, and there had already been a propulsion test. The *Austen Rover* had been chained to the floor, and the engines had been spooled up. With a deafening roar, the *Rover* had flexed at the chains while an inky black void had opened up in front of it. The engines had been throttled back, and the void had closed. It didn't have the quiet subtleness of Mycroft's Prose Portal, but it had certainly been impressive.

That had been three hours earlier. Right now we were in the control room, and I'd been trying to explain to them just what

form the BookWorld takes, which was a bit odd, as it was really only *my* interpretation of it, and I had a feeling that if they accepted *my* way, it would become *the* way, so I was careful not to describe anything that might be problematical later. I spread a sheet of paper on the table and drew a rough schematic of the various genres that made up the BookWorld, but without too many precise locations--just enough for them to get us inside and then to *It Was a Dark and Stormy Night* without any problems.

"The Nothing is a big place," I said without fear of understatement, "and mostly empty. Theoretical storyologists have calculated that the readable BookWorld makes up only twenty-two percent of visible reading matter--the remainder is the unobservable remnants of long-lost books, forgotten oral tradition and ideas still locked in writers' heads. We call it 'dark reading matter.'"

"Why is so much of it unread and untold?"

I shrugged. "We're not altogether sure, but we think ninety-eight percent of the world's fiction was wiped out by the accidental death of an Iron Age storyteller about three thousand years ago. It was what we call a 'mass erasure'--we wouldn't see anything of that size until human perfidy, fire and mold wiped out seventy-five percent of Greek drama at the CE boundary. The reason I mention it is that navigating through the Nothing could be more treacherous than you imagine--colliding with a lost work of Aeschylus or being pulled apart by the Hemingway 'lost suitcase of manuscripts' could bring your trip to a painfully verbose. And incorrectly punctuated. End."

Dr. Wirthlass nodded sagely.

I drew a rough circle near the Maritime Adventure (Civilian) genre. "We think that this area is heavy with detritus from an unknown genre--possibly Squid Action/Adventure--that failed to fully form a century ago. Twice a year Maritime is pelted with small fragments of ideas and snatches of inner monologue regarding important invertebrate issues that don't do much harm, but bookjumping through this zone has always been a bit bumpy. If we wanted to go from Maritime to Frontier quickly and easily, we wouldn't jump direct but go

through Western."

We talked along these lines for a good four hours; it surprised me that I knew so much about the BookWorld without really having had to sit down and learn it, and it also surprised me to what an advanced stage the Goliath Book Project had progressed. By agreement they would drop me on page 68 of *It Was a Dark and Stormy Night* before slingshotting back to Goliath, then await my return and a debrief before attempting any further travel. I had made my demands clearly when I'd spoken to John Henry the previous evening. They would do this my way or not at all, something that he was happy to agree with. He also proposed some sort of business partnership where I could oversee the whole *Austen Rover* project and determine in what direction book tourism would go. I still didn't like the idea of it, but if the alternative was the wholesale loss of all the classics through reality book shows, then I'd pretend to go along. I told John Henry we could discuss the precise details upon my return. Throughout the day I'd been having nagging doubts about cozying up to Goliath despite their entreaties, and in an afternoon rest break I wandered into the employees' canteen area, where there was a TV showing a program all about the upcoming *Pride and Prejudice* reality show.

"Welcome to *Bennetmania*," said a lively young man with painfully fashionable facial hair. He was presenting one of several reality book TV shows that had been rushed onto the schedules to cater to the latest fad. "...And our studio panel will be here to give an up-to-date analysis of the book's unfolding drama as soon as it begins. Dr. Nessecitar, our resident pseudopsychologist, will point out the bleeding obvious about the Bennet house mates' progress, and our resident experts will give their opinions and advice on whom should be voted out. But first let's have a rundown on who our house mates actually are."

I stood and stared with a kind of numb fascination as a jaunty tune started up under an annoyingly buoyant voice-over that accompanied "artists' impressions" of the family.

"Mr. Bennet is the father of the clan, and when he's not chastizing his younger daughters for their silliness or teasing

his wife, he likes nothing better than to sit in his study and conduct his affairs. His wife is Mrs. Bennet, who has a brother in trade and is convinced that her daughters should marry up. This old bunny is highly unstable, prone to panic attacks and socially awkward, so keep your eyes fixed on her for some seriously good fireworks."

The illustration changed to that of the sisters, with each being highlighted in turn as the voice-over described them.

"None of the daughters will inherit Longbourn due to the lack of an heir, and the apparent absence of any suitable males in Meryton makes the issue of potential husbands a major concern. Curvaceous, doe-eyed Jane, twenty-two, is the beauty of the family, with a kindly temperament to match. And if Bingley looks at another woman, hold on for the waterworks! Next in line is the thinker of the house and Mr. Bennet's favorite: Lizzie, who is twenty. Willful, skillful and adept with words, she is certainly one to watch--never mind the looks, check out the subtext! Third eldest is Mary, who just likes to read and criticize the rest of them. Dreary and unappealing, and we don't think she'll last long. Kitty and Lydia are the two youngest of the Bennets and the silliest and most excitable of them all, especially when there's a uniform around, or even the sniff of a party. Impetuous and uncontrollable--these are the two that all eyes will be riveted upon!"

The music ended, and the annoying presenter came back on-screen.

"There you have it. Seven Bennets, one house, three chapters, one task, one eviction. Bookies are already taking bets as to who's for the bullet. Tune in tomorrow at eleven P.M. with your book in hand to read the house mates' first task as it is set, and join us for the reading of *The Bennets--live!*"

I switched off the set and walked back to the Book Project lab, all doubts over the wisdom of my actions dispelled from my mind.

By six that evening, the *Austen Rover* was primed and ready to go. Although there was seating for twelve, the crew was to be only the four of us--myself, Dr. Wirthlass and two technicians, whose sole function was to monitor the systems and collect data. I called Landen before we left and told him

I'd be home before bedtime. I didn't see any problems. After all, I'd been prancing around the inside of the BookWorld for near on twenty years and had faced almost all the terrors that could be thrown in my direction. I felt as safe and confident inside fiction as I did walking down the street in Swindon. I'd turn up at the CofG, reveal Thursday1-4 as an impostor, put everything to rights and be back in time to take Jenny to her piano lesson. Simple. But if it *was* that simple, why did my insides feel so leaden?

John Henry Goliath came to see us off, and we all shook hands before the door closed and sealed itself with a hermetic hiss. The doctor and the two technicians were too busy to be worried over the risks, something that I felt myself but tried not to show. After a half-hour countdown, Wirthlass fired up the main reactors, released the handbrake, rang the bell twice and engaged the gravity engines.

And with a mild tingling sensation, we were somewhere else entirely.

### Somewhere Else Entirely

The BookWorld was generally agreed to be only part of a much larger Bookverse, but quite how big it was and what percentage was unobservable was a matter of hot debate among booklogians. The fundamental rules of the Bookverse were also contentious. Some factions argued that the Bookverse was constantly expanding as new books were written, but others argued convincingly of a steady-state Bookverse, where ideas were endlessly recycled. A third faction who called themselves "simplists" argued that there was a single fundamental rule that governed all story: If it works, it works.

The darkness drifted away like morning mist, leaving us hovering above a slate gray sea with empty horizons in all directions. The sky was the same color as the sea and stretched across the heavens like a blanket, heavy and oppressive. A light breeze blew flecks of foam from the tops of the waves, and positioned not thirty feet below us was an old steamer of riveted construction. The vessel was making a leisurely pace through the waves, a trail of black smoke issuing languidly from her funnel and the stern trailing a creamy wake as the ship rose and fell in the seas.

"That'll be the *Auberon*," I said, craning my neck to see if I could spot Captain Carver in the wheel house. I couldn't, so I asked Wirthlass to move closer and try to land the *Rover* on the aft hold cover so I could step aboard. She expertly moved the bus in behind the bridge and gently lowered it onto the boards, which creaked ominously under the weight. The door of the coach hissed opened, and a strong whiff of salty air mixed with coal smoke drifted in. I could feel the rhythmic thump of the engine and the swell of the ocean through the decking. I took my bag and stepped from the *Rover*, but I hadn't gone three paces when all of a sudden I realized there

was something badly wrong. This ship wasn't the *Auberon*, and if that was the case, this book certainly wasn't *Dark and Stormy Night*.

"Okay, we've got a problem," I said, turning back to the *Rover* only to find Dr. Wirthlass standing in the doorway--holding a pistol and *smiling*.

"*Ballocks*," I muttered, which was about as succinct as I could be, given the sudden change of circumstance.

"*Ballocks* indeed," replied Dr. Wirthlass. "We've waited over fifteen years for this moment."

"Before now I'd always thought patience was a virtue," I murmured, "not the secret weapon of the vengeful."

She shook her head and smiled again. "You're *exactly* how he described you. An ardent moralist, a Goody Two-shoes, pathologically eager to do what's best and what's right." She looked around at the ship, which heeled in the swell. "So this place is particularly apt--and the perfect place for you to spend the rest of your pitifully short life."

"What do you want?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. With you trapped here, we have everything I want. We'll be off to the *Hesperus* now, Ms. Next--to find that recipe."

"You know about the unscrambled eggs?" I asked, shocked at the sudden turn of events.

"We're Goliath," she said simply, "and information is power. With the End of Time due tomorrow evening, it will be something of a challenge, but listen: I like a challenge, and I have the knowledge of your defeat to freshen my mind and make the task that much more enjoyable."

"You'll never find it," I said. "Longfellow is at the other end of the BookWorld, and Poetry is the place you'll discover--"

I checked myself. I wasn't helping these people, no matter how acute the perils.

"Discover what?" asked Wirthlass with a frown.

"Never mind."

"We'll be fine," she replied. "We just needed your expertise to make the initial jump. We're not *quite* so stupid as you think."

I couldn't believe that I'd been hoodwinked by Goliath again. I had to hand it to them--this plan had been hatched



and executed *beautifully*.

"How long have you known about the recipe?"

"That's just the weirdest thing of it." Dr. Wirthlass smiled. "On the one hand, only a day, but on the other...over fifteen years."

"Retrospective investment," I whispered, suddenly understanding. In their desperation, the ChronoGuard was breaking every single rule they'd ever made.

"Right! The Star Chamber lost confidence in your son's ability to secure the future, so they called Lavoisier out of retirement to see if there weren't *other* avenues to explore. He approached John Henry yesterday at breakfast time to ask him if the long-abandoned Book Project could be brought up to speed. Since it couldn't, Lavoisier suggested that they restart the project fifteen years ago so it could be ready for the End of Time tomorrow evening. John Henry agreed with certain *conditions*, and I must say we only just made it."

"This is something of a mindf\*\*k," I replied, with no possibility of understatement. "What does Goliath get out of it?"

"How do you think we survived being taken over by the Toast Marketing Board? Two days ago Goliath was just a bad memory, with John Henry in debtors' prison and me working for International Pencils. When you have friends in the time industry, anything is possible. The ChronoGuard will be willing to offer us almost untold patronage for the recipe to unscramble eggs and, with it, the secret to travel in time. And in return? A corporation allowed to speculate freely in *time*. Finally we will be able to bring our 'big plan' to fruition."

"And that plan is...?"

"To own...everything."

"In a world with a Short Now?"

"Of course! With a compliant population only interested in the self and instant gratification, we can flog all manner of worthless crap as the 'latest thing to have.' There'll be big profits, Next--and by subtly choosing from whom the Now is mined, the Long Now Uberclass can sit back and enjoy the benefits that will be theirs and theirs alone."

I stared at Wirthlass, wondering if I could rush her. It

seemed doubtful, since I was at least ten feet away, and the two technicians still on board the *Rover* also looked as if they had weapons.

"Okay," said the doctor, "we're all about done here. Enjoy your imprisonment. You'll know what it was like for my husband. Two years in "The Raven," Next--*two years*. He still has nightmares, even today."

"You're Jack Schitt's *wife*?"

She smiled again. "Now you're getting it. My full name is Dr. Anne Wirthlass-Schitt, but if you'd known, it might have been a bit of a giveaway, hmm? Bye-bye now."

The door swung shut, the bell rang twice, there was a low hiss and the *Austen Rover* lifted off. They hovered for a moment and then slowly rotated, expertly missed the crane derrick, rose above the height of the funnel and then became long and drawn out like a piece of elastic before vanishing with a faint pop. I was left standing on the deck, biting my lip in frustration and anger. I took a deep breath and calmed myself. The reality book show of *The Bennets* wasn't due to start until tomorrow morning, so there was always hope. I looked around. The steamer rolled gently in the swell, the smoke drifted across the stern past the fluttering red ensign, and the beat of the engine echoed up through the steel deck. I knew I wasn't in *Dark and Stormy Night*, because the ship wasn't a rusty old tub held together by paint, but I was certainly *somewhere*, and somewhere was better than nowhere. It was only when I arrived there and was out of ideas, time and essential metabolic functions that I was going to give up.

I trotted up the companionway, ducked into the galley and made my way up the ladder to the bridge, where a boy not much older than Friday was holding the ship's wheel.

"Who's in command?" I asked, a bit breathless.

"Why, *you*, of course," replied the lad.

"I'm not."

"Then why are you a-wearin' the cap?"

I put up my hands to check, and strangely enough, I was wearing the captain's cap. I took it off and stared at it stupidly.

"What book is this?"

"No book I knows of, Cap'n. What be your orders?"

I looked out of the wheel house ahead but could see nothing except a gray sea meeting a gray sky. The light was soft and directionless, and for the first time I felt a shiver of dread. Something about this place was undeniably *creepy*, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I went to the navigation desk and looked at the chart. There was nothing on it but the pale blueness of open ocean, and a cursory look in the drawers of the desk told me that every chart was the same. What ever this place was, this was all there was of it. I had to assume I was somewhere in the Maritime genre, but a quick glance at my mobilefootnoterphone and the absence of any signal told me that I was several thousand volumes beyond our repeater station in the Hornblower series, and if that was the case, I was right on the periphery of the genre--as good as lost. I tapped my finger on the desk and thought hard. Panic was the mind killer, and I still had several hours to figure this out. If I was no further on in ten hours' time--*then* I could panic.

"What are your orders, Cap'n?" asked the lad at the wheel again.

"What's your name?"

"Baldwin."

"I'm Thursday. Thursday Next."

"Good to know you, Cap'n Next."

"Have you heard my name? Or of Jurisfiction?"

He shook his head.

"Right. Tell me, Baldwin, do you know this ship well?"

"As well as I know meself," he replied proudly.

"Is there a core-containment room?"

"Not that I knows of."

So we weren't in a published work.

"How about a Storycode Engine anywhere on board?"

He frowned and looked confused. "There's an *ordinary* engine room. I don't know nuffin' 'bout no *Storycode*."

I scratched my head. Without a Storycode Engine, we were either nonfiction or something in the oral tradition. Those were the upbeat possibilities: I might also be in a forgotten story, a dead writer's unrealized idea or even a handwritten short story stuck in a desk drawer somewhere--the dark reading matter.

"What year is this?"

"Spring of 1932, Cap'n."

"And the purpose of this voyage?"

"Not for the likes of me to know, Cap'n."

"But *something* must happen!"

"Oh, aye," he said more confidently, "things most *definite* happen!"

"What sort of things?"

"*Difficult* things, Cap'n."

As if in answer to his enigmatic comment, someone shouted my name. I walked out onto the port wing, where a man in a first officer's uniform was on the deck below. He was in his mid-fifties and looked vaguely cultured, but somehow out of place, as though his service in the merchant navy had been to remove him from problems at home.

"Captain Next?" he said.

"Yes, sort of."

"First Officer William Fitzwilliam at your service, ma'am. We've got a problem with the passengers!"

"Can't you deal with it?"

"No, ma'am--*you're* the captain."

I descended and met Fitzwilliam at the foot of the ladder. He led me into the paneled wardroom, where there were three people waiting for us. The first man was standing stiffly with his arms folded and looked aggrieved. He was well dressed in a black morning coat and wore a small pince-nez perched on the end of his nose. The other two were obviously man and wife. The woman was of an unhealthy pallor, had recently been crying and was being comforted by her husband, who every now and then shot an angry glance at the first man.

"I'm very busy," I told them. "What's the problem here?"

"My name is Mr. Langdon," said the married man, wringing his hands. "My wife, Louise, here suffers from Zachary's syndrome, and without the necessary medicine she will die."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," I said, "but what can I do?"

"That man has the medicine!" cried Langdon, pointing an accusatory finger at the man in the pince-nez. "Yet he refuses to sell it to me!"

"Is this true?"

"My name is Dr. Glistler," said the man, nodding politely. "I have the medicine, it is true, but the price is two thousand guineas, and Mr. and Mrs. Langdon have only a thousand guineas and not the capacity to borrow more!"

"Well," I said to the doctor, "I think it would be a kindly gesture to lower the price, don't you?"

"I wish that I could," replied Dr. Glistler, "but this medicine cost me everything I possessed to develop. It destroyed my health and damaged my reputation. If I do not recoup my losses, I will be forced into ruin, my property will be repossessed, and my six children will become destitute. I am sympathetic to Mrs. Langdon's trouble, but this is a fiscal issue."

"Listen," I said to the Langdons, "it's not up to me. The medicine is Dr. Glistler's property for him to dispose of as he wishes."

"But she needs the medicine *now*," pleaded Mr. Langdon. "If she doesn't get it, she will die. You are the captain on this ship and so have the ultimate authority. You *must* make the decision."

I sighed. I had a lot more important things to deal with right now.

"Dr. Glistler, give him the medicine for a thousand guineas. Mr. Langdon, you will work to repay Dr. Glistler *no matter what*. Understand?"

"But my livelihood!" wailed Glistler.

"I place Mrs. Langdon's *definite* death above the *possibility* of your penury, Dr. Glistler."

"But this is nothing short of theft!" he replied, outraged at my words. "And I have done nothing wrong--only discovered a cure for a fatal illness. I deserve better treatment than this!"

"You do, you're right. But I know nothing of you, nor the Langdons. My decision is based only on the saving of a life. Will you excuse me?"

Baldwin had called from the wheel house, and I quickly scooted up the stairs.

"What is it?"

He pointed to something about a mile off the starboard bow. I picked up a pair of binoculars and trained it on the distant

object. Finally some good luck. It looked like a "turmoil," the name we gave to a small, localized disruption in the fabric of the written word. This was how heavy weather in the BookWorld got started: A turmoil would soon progress into a powerful WordStorm able to uproot words, ideas and even people, then carry them with it across the empty darkness of the Nothing, eventually dumping them on distant books several genres distant. It was my way out. I'd never hitched a ride on a WordStorm before, but it didn't look too difficult. Dorothy, after all, had no real problems with the tornado.

"Alter course to starboard thirty degrees," I said. "We're going to intercept the WordStorm. How long do you think it will take for us to get there, Baldwin?"

"Twenty minutes, Cap'n."

It would be a close thing. Turmoils increase their pace until a rotating tube rises up into the heavens, filled with small sections of plot and anything else it can suck up. Then, with a flurry of distorted sense, it lifts off and vanishes. I wouldn't get this chance again.

"Is that wise, Captain?" asked First Officer Fitzwilliam, who had joined us on the bridge. "I've seen storms like that. They can do serious damage--and we have forty passengers, many of them women and children."

"Then you can lower me in a lifeboat ahead of the storm."

"And leave us without a lifeboat?"

"Yes...*no*...I don't know. Fitzwilliam?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"What is this place?"

"I don't know what you mean, Captain."

"I mean--"

"Cap'n," said Baldwin, pointing off of the port side of the ship, "isn't that a lifeboat?"

I turned my attention to the area in which he pointed. It *was* a lifeboat, with what looked like several people, all slumped and apparently unconscious. *Damn*. I looked again, hoping for confirmation that they might already be dead, but saw nothing to tell me either way. I frowned to myself. Had I just hoped for them to be dead?

"You can pick them up after you've dropped me off," I said.

"It'll only mean an extra forty minutes for them, and I really need to get out of here."

I saw Fitzwilliam and Baldwin exchange glances. But as we watched, the lifeboat was caught by a wave and capsized, casting the occupants into the sea. We could see now that they *were* alive, and as they scrabbled weakly to cling to the upturned boat, I gave the order.

"Turn about. Reduce power and stand by to pick up survivors."

"Aye-aye, Cap'n," said Baldwin, spinning the wheel as Fitzwilliam rung up "slow ahead" on the engine-room telegraph. I walked out onto the starboard wing and watched despondently as the turmoil developed into a WordStorm. Within the twenty minutes it took to intercept the lifeboat, the whirling mass of narrative distortion lifted off, taking part of the description of the ocean with it. There was a ragged dark hole for an instant, and then the sea washed in to fill the anomaly, and in a few moments everything was back to normal. Perhaps I should have left the lifeboat. After all, the Long Now and the classics were more important than several fictional castaways. Mind you, if I'd been on that lifeboat, I know what I would have wanted.

"Captain!"

It was Dr. Glistler.

"I don't want to know about your arguments with the Langdons," I told him.

"No, no," he replied in something of a panic, "you *cannot* pick up these castaways!"

"Why not?"

"They have Squurd's disease."

"They have *what*?"

We walked into the wheel house and out again onto the port wing, where Fitzwilliam was directing the rescue operation. The lifeboat was still ahead of us at least a hundred yards. The ship was moving forward slowly, a cling net had been thrown over the side, and several burly sailors were making ready to pick up the castaways.

"Look carefully at the survivors," urged Dr. Glistler, and I trained my binoculars on the small group. Now that they were

closer, I could see that their faces were covered with unsightly green pustules.

I lowered the binoculars and looked at Dr. Glistler. "What's the prognosis?"

"A hundred percent fatal, and highly contagious. Bring them on board and we'll be looking at a minimum of twenty percent casualties. We don't reach port for six months, and these poor wretches will already have died in agony long before we could get any help to them."

I rubbed my temples. "You're completely sure of this?"

He nodded. I took a deep breath.

"Fitzwilliam?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Break off the rescue."

"What?"

"You heard me. These people have a contagious fatal illness, and I won't risk my passengers' lives saving castaways who will die no matter what we do."

"But, Captain!" he protested. "We *never* leave a man in the water!"

"We're doing it today, Fitzwilliam. Do you understand?"

He glared at me menacingly, then leaned over the rail and repeated my order, making sure the men knew who had made it. After that, he went into the wheel house, rang up "full ahead," and the vessel shuddered as we made extra speed and steamed on.

"Come inside," said Dr. Glistler.

"No," I said. "I'm staying here. I won't hide from the men I've condemned to death."

And I stood there and watched as the lifeboat and the men drifted astern of the ship and were soon lost to view in the seas.

It was with a heavy heart that I walked back into the wheel-house and sat in the captain's chair. Baldwin was silent, gazing straight ahead.

"It was the right thing to do," I muttered, to no one in particular. "And what's more, I could have used the WordStorm to escape after all."

"Things happen here," muttered Baldwin. "*Difficult* things."



I suddenly had a thought, but hoped upon hope I was wrong. "What's the name of this ship?"

"The ship?" replied Baldwin cheerily. "It's the steamship *Moral Dilemma*, Cap'n."

I covered my face with my hands and groaned. Anne Wirthlass-Schitt and her obnoxious husband had not been kidding when they said they'd chosen this place especially for me. My nerves were already badly frayed, and I felt the heavy hand of guilt pressing upon me. I'd only been here an hour--what would I be like in a week, or a month? Truly, I was trapped in an unenviable place: adrift on the Hypothetical Ocean, in command of the *Moral Dilemma*.

"Captain?"

It was the cook this time. He was unshaven and wearing a white uniform that had so many food stains on it that it was hard to say where stain ended and uniform began.

"Yes?" I said, somewhat wearily.

"Begging your pardon, but there's been a gross underestimation on the provisions."

"And?"

"We don't get into port for another six months," the cook continued, referring to a grubby sheet of calculations he had on him, "and we only have enough to feed the crew and passengers on strict rations for two-thirds of that time."

"What are you saying?"

"That all forty of us will starve long before we reach port."

I beckoned Fitzwilliam over. "There wouldn't be another port closer than that, would there?"

"No, Captain," he answered. "Port Conjecture is the only port there is."

"I thought so. And no fish either?"

"Not in these waters."

"Other ships?"

"None."

I got it now. These were the "difficult things" Baldwin had spoken of, and they were mine and mine alone to deal with. The ship, the sea and the people on it might be hypothetical--but they could suffer and die the same as anyone.

"Thank you, Cook," I said. "I'll let you know of my decision."

He gave a lazy salute and was gone.

"Well, Fitzwilliam," I said, doing some simple math on a piece of paper, "there's enough food for twenty-six people to survive until we reach port. Do you think we could find fourteen volunteers to throw themselves over the side to ensure the survival of the rest?"

"I doubt it."

"Then I have something of a problem. Is my primary sense of duty as captain to see to it that as many people as possible survive on my ship, or is it my moral obligation not to conduct or condone murder?"

"The men in the lifeboat just now wouldn't see you as anything but a murderer."

"Perhaps so, but this one's harder; it's not a case of *inaction* to bring about a circumstance, but *action*. This is what I'm going to do. Anyone under eighteen is excluded, as are six essential crew to keep the ship going. All the rest will choose straws--thirteen will go over the side."

"If they don't want to go?"

"Then I will throw them over."

"You'll hang for it."

"I won't. I'll be the fourteenth."

"Very...*selfless*," murmured Fitzwilliam, "but even after your crew and age exclusions, thirty-one passengers are still under eighteen. You will still have to select seven of them. Will you be able to throw *them* overboard, the children, the innocents?"

"But I save the rest, right?"

"It's not for me to say," said Fitzwilliam quietly. "I am not the captain."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, my heart thumping and a cold panic roiling inside me. I had to do terrible things in order to save others, and I'm not sure I could even do it--and thus imperil everyone's life. I stopped for a moment and thought. The dilemmas had been getting progressively worse since I arrived. Perhaps this place--wherever it was--was quirkily responsive to my decisions. I decided to try something.

"No," I said. "I'm not going to kill anyone simply because an abstract ethical situation demands it. We're going to sail on as

we are and trust to providence that we meet another ship. If we don't, then we may die, but we will have at least done the right thing by one another."

There was a distant rumble of thunder in the distance, and the boat heeled over. I wondered what would be next.

"Begging your pardon, Captain, but I bring bad news." It was a steward whom I hadn't seen before.

"And...?"

"We have a gentleman in the wardroom who claims there is a bomb on board the ship--and it's set to go off in ten minutes."

I allowed myself a wry smile. The rapidly changing scenarios seemed to have a clumsy intelligence to them. It was possible this was something in the oral tradition, but I couldn't be sure. If this small world were somehow sentient, though, it could be beaten. To vanquish it, I needed to find its weakness, and it had just supplied one: *impatience*. It didn't want a long, drawn-out starvation for the passengers; it wanted me to commit a hands-on murder for the greater good--and soon.

"Show me."

I followed the steward down into the wardroom, where a man was sitting in a chair in the middle of the room. He looked sallow and had fine, wispy blond hair and small eyes that stared intently at me as I walked in. A burly sailor named McTavish, who was tattoo and Scotsman in a three-to-four ratio, was standing guard over him. There was no one else in the room--there didn't need to be. It was a hypothetical situation.

"Your name, sir?"

"Jebediah Salford. And I have hidden a bomb--"

"I heard. And naturally you won't tell me where it is?"

"Naturally."

"This bomb," I went on, "will sink the ship, potentially leading to many deaths?"

"Indeed, I hope so," replied Jebediah cheerily.

"Your own included?"

"I fear no death."

I paused for thought. It was a classic and overused ethical dilemma. Would I, as an essentially good person, reduce

myself to torturing someone for the greater good? It was a puzzle that had been discussed for many years, generally by those to whom it has no chance of becoming real. But the way in which the scenarios came on thick and fast suggested that whoever was running this show had a prurient interest in seeing just how far a decent person could be pushed before doing bad things. I could almost feel the architect of the dilemma gloating over me from afar. I would have to stall him if I could.

"Fitzwilliam? Have all passengers go on deck, close all watertight doors, and have every crew member and able-bodied passenger look for the bomb."

"Captain," he said, "that's a waste of time. There *is* a bomb, but you can't find it. The decision has to be made here and now, in this wardroom."

Damn. Outmaneuvered.

"How many lifeboats do we have?" I asked, getting increasingly desperate.

"Only one left, ma'am--with room for ten."

"Shit. How long do we have left before this bomb goes off?"

"Seven minutes."

If this were the real world and in a situation as black and white as this, there wasn't a decision to make. I would use all force necessary to get the information. But, most important, submit myself to scrutiny afterward. If you permit or conduct torture, you must be personally responsible for your actions--it's the kind of decision where it's best to have the threat of prison looming behind you. But the thing was, on board this ship here and now, it didn't look as though torturing him would actually achieve anything at all. He would eventually tell me, the bomb would be found--and the next dilemma would begin. And they would carry on, again and again, worse and worse, until I had done everything I would never have done and the passengers of this vessel were drowned, eaten or murdered. It was hell for me, but it would be hell for them, too. I sat down heavily on a nearby chair, put my head in hands and stared at the floor.

"Captain," said Fitzwilliam, "we only have five minutes. You *must* torture this person."

"Yeah, yeah," I mumbled incoherently, "I know."

"We will all die," he continued. "*Again.*"

I looked up into his eyes. I'd never noticed how incredibly blue they were.

"You all die in the end, don't you?" I said miserably. "No matter what I do. It's just one increasingly bad dilemma after another until everyone's dead, right?"

"Four minutes, Captain."

"Am I right?"

Fitzwilliam looked away.

"I asked you a question, Number One."

He looked up at me, and he seemed to have tears in his eyes. "We have all been drowned," he said in a quiet voice, "over a thousand times each. We have been eaten, blown up and suffered fatal illnesses. The drownings are the worst. Each time I can feel the smothering effect of water, the blind panic as I suffocate--"

"Fitzwilliam," I demanded, "where is this damnable place?"

He took a deep breath and lowered his voice. "We're oral tradition, but we're not in a story--we're an *ethics seminar*."

"You mean you're all hypothetical characters during a lecture?"

Fitzwilliam nodded miserably. The steward somewhat chillingly handed me a pair of pliers, while reminding me in an urgent whisper that there were only three minutes left.

I looked down at the pliers in an absent sort of way, at Jebediah, then back to Fitzwilliam, who was staring at the floor. So much suffering on board this ship, and for so long. Perhaps there *was* another way out. The thing was, to take such radical action in the oral tradition risked the life of the lecturer giving the talk. But what was more important? The well-being of one real-life ethics professor or the relentless torture of his subjects, who had to undergo his sadistic and relentless hypothetical dilemmas for two-hour sessions three times a week? When you tell a tragic story, someone dies for real in the BookWorld. I was in the oral tradition. Potentially the best storytelling there was--and the most destructive.

"McTavish, prepare the lifeboat for launching. I'm leaving."

McTavish looked at Fitzwilliam, who shrugged, and the

large Scotsman and his tattoos departed.

"That isn't one of the options," said Fitzwilliam. "You can't do it."

"I have experience of the oral tradition," I told him. "All these scenarios are taking place only because I am here to preside in judgment upon them. This whole thing goes just one way: in a downward spiral of increasingly impossible moral dilemmas that will leave everyone dead except myself and one other, whom I will be forced to kill and eat or something. If I take myself out of the equation, you are free to sail across the sea unhampered, unimpeded--and safe."

"But that might...that might--"

"Harm the lecturer, even kill him? Possibly. If the bomb goes off, you'll know I've failed and he's okay. If it doesn't, you'll all be safe."

"And you?" he asked. "What about you?"

I patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry about me. I think you've all suffered enough on account of the Outland."

"But surely...we can pick you up again if all goes well?"

"No," I said, "that's not how it works. It can't be a trick. I have to cast myself adrift."

I trotted out of the wardroom and to the side of the ship, where McTavish had already lowered the lifeboat. It was being held against the scramble net by lines fore and aft clutched by deck-hands, and it thumped against the hull as the waves caught it. As I put my leg over the rail to climb down, Fitzwilliam grasped my arm. He wasn't trying to stop me--he wanted to shake me by the hand.

"Good-bye, Captain--and thank you."

I smiled. "Think you'll make Port Conjecture?"

He smiled back. "We'll give it our best shot."

I climbed down the scramble net and into the lifeboat. They let go fore and aft, and the boat rocked violently as the bow wave caught it. For a moment I thought it would go over, but it stayed upright, and I rapidly fell behind as the ship steamed on.

I counted off the seconds until the bomb was meant to explode, but, thankfully, it didn't, and across the sea I heard the cheer of forty people celebrating their release. I couldn't

share in their elation, because in a university somewhere back home the ethics lecturer had suddenly keeled over with an aneurysm. They'd call a doctor, and with a bit of luck he'd pull through. He might even lecture again, but not with this crew.

The *Moral Dilemma* was at least a quarter mile away by now, and within ten minutes the steamer was just a smudge of smoke on the horizon. In another half hour, it had vanished completely, and I was on my own in a gray sea that lasted forever in all directions. I looked through my shoulder bag and found a bar of chocolate, which I ate in a despondent manner and then just sat in the bow of the lifeboat and stared up at the gray sky, feeling hopelessly lost. I leaned back and closed my eyes.

Had I done the right thing? I had no idea. The lecturer couldn't have known the suffering he was putting his hypothetical characters through, but even if he had, perhaps he'd justify it by reasoning that the suffering was worth the benefits to his students. If he survived, I'd be able to ask him his opinion. But that wasn't likely. Rescue seemed a very remote possibility, and that was at the nub of the whole ethical-dilemma argument. You never come out on top, no matter what. The only way to win the game is not to play.

## Rescue/Capture

There was only one Jurisfiction agent who worked exclusively in the oral tradition. He was named Ski, rarely spoke and wore a tall hat in the manner of Lincoln--but that was the sum total of his recognizable features. When appearing at the Jurisfiction offices, he was always insubstantial, flickering in and out like a badly tuned TV. Despite this he did some of the best work in the OralTrad I'd seen. Rumor had it that he was a discarded Childhood Imaginary Friend, which accounted for his inconsolable melancholy.

When I awoke, nothing had changed. The sea was still gray, the sky a dull overcast. The water was choppy but not dangerously so and had a sort of twenty-second pattern of movement to it. With nothing better to do, I sat up and watched the waves as they rose and fell. By fixing my eyes on a random part of the ocean, I could see that the same wave would come around again like a loop in a film. Most of the BookWorld was like that. Fictional forests had only eight different trees, a beach five different pebbles, a sky twelve different clouds. It was what made the real world so rich by comparison. I looked at my watch. The reality book show of *The Bennets* would be replacing *Pride and Prejudice* in three hours, and the first task of the house hold would be unveiled in two. Equally bad, that worthless shit Wirthless-Schitt might well have the recipe by now and would be hoofing it back to Goliath. But then again, she might not. I'd visited enough Poetry to know that it's an emotionally draining place and on a completely different level. Whereas story is processed in the mind in a straightforward manner, poetry bypasses rational thought and goes straight to the limbic system and lights it up like a brushfire. It's the crack cocaine of the literary world.

My mind, I knew, was wandering. It was intentional. If I didn't let it, it returned like an annoying default setting to



Landen and the kids. Whenever I thought of them, my eyes welled up, and that was no good for anything. Perhaps, I mused, instead of lying to Landen after the Minotaur had shot me in 1988, I should have just stayed at home and led a blameless life of unabashed domestication. Washing, cleaning and making meals. Okay, with *some* part-time work down at Acme in case I went nuts. But no SpecOps stuff. None. *Except* maybe dispatching a teensy-weensy chimera. Or two. And if Spike needed a hand? Well, I couldn't say no, now could--

1

My thoughts were interrupted by my mobilefootnoterphone. Until now it had been resolutely silent. I dug it out of my bag and stared at it hopefully. There was still no signal, which meant that *someone else* was within a radius of about 10 million words. Not far in a shelf of Russian novels, perhaps, but out here in the oral tradition it could mean over a thousand stories or more. It was entirely possible that whoever it was wasn't a friend at all, but anything was better than slow starvation, so I keyed the mike and pretended I was a communications expert from OFF-FNOP, the watchdog responsible for overseeing the network.

"OFF-FNOP tech number...um, 76542: Request user ident."

I looked carefully all around me, but the horizon was clear. There was nothing at all, just endless gray. It was like--

2

I paused. Footnoterphones weren't like normal phones--they were textual. It was impossible to tell who was talking. It was a bit like text messages back home, but without the dopey CUL8R shorthand nonsense.

"I say again: Request user ident."

I looked around desperately, but still nothing. I hoped it wasn't another poor twit like me, compelled to take over the reins as ethical arbiter.

3

My heart suddenly leaped. Whoever it was, was somewhere close--and didn't read like anyone who would do me harm. I needed to tell the person how to find me, but the only directions I could think of were "I'm near a wave," which was marginally less useful than "I'm in a boat." Then I had an idea.

"If you can hear me," I said into my phone, "head for the

rainstorm of text."

I tucked the phone in my pocket and took out my pistol. I released the safety, pointed it into the air and fired. There was a low thud, and the air seemed to wobble as the eraserhead arced high into the sky. It was a risky move, as it would almost certainly be picked up by the weather stations dotted around the genres and from there to Text Grand Central. If they were looking for me, they'd know instantly where I was.

It took a few seconds for the charge to reach the thick stratus of cloud, but when it hit, the effect can be described only as spectacular. There was a yellow-and-green starburst, and the textual clouds changed rapidly from gray to black as the words dissolved, taking the meaning with them. A dark cloud of letters was soon fluttering down toward the sea like chaff, a pillar of text that could be seen for miles. They landed on me and the boat, but mostly the sea, where they settled like autumn leaves on a lake.

I looked up and saw that the hole in the clouds was already healing itself, and within a few minutes the text would start to sink. I opened the pistol and reloaded, but I didn't need to fire a second time. On the horizon and heading toward me was a small dot that gradually grew bigger and bigger until it was overhead, then circled twice before it slowed to a stop, hovering in the air right next to the lifeboat. The driver rolled down his window and consulted a clipboard.

"Are you Ms. Next?" he asked, which was mildly surprising, to say the least.

"Yes, I am."

"And you ordered me?"

"Yes, yes I did."

"Well, you better get in, then."

I was still in mild shock at the turn of events but quickly gathered my thoughts and my belongings and climbed into the yellow vehicle. It was dented and dirty and had the familiar TransGenre Taxis logo on the door. I'd never been so glad to see a cab in my entire life.

I settled myself into the backseat as the driver switched on the meter, turned to me with a grin and said, "Had the devil's job finding you, darling--where to?"

It was a good point. I thought for a moment. *Pride and Prejudice* was definitely in dire peril, but if the Now got any shorter, then *all* books were in danger--and a lot more besides.

"Longfellow," I said, "and make it snappy. I think we're going to have some unwanted company."

The cabbie raised his eyebrows, pressed on the accelerator, and we were soon scooting across the sea at a good rate of knots.

He caught my eye in the rearview mirror. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"The worst kind," I replied, thinking that I was going to have to trust this cabbie to do the right thing. "I'm subject to a shoot-to-kill order from the CofG, but it's bullshit. I'm a Jurisdiction agent, and I could seriously do with some help right now."

"Bureaucrats!" he snorted disparagingly, then thought hard for a moment and added, "Next, Next--you wouldn't be *Thursday* Next, would you?"

"That's me."

"I like your books a lot. Especially the early ones with all the killing and gratuitous sex."

"I'm not like that. I'm--"

"Whoa!"

The cabbie swerved abruptly, and I was thrown violently to the other side of the taxi. I looked out the rear window and could see a figure in a long black dress hit the sea in a cascade of foam. They were onto me already.

"That was strange," said the cabbie, "but I could have sworn that was a fifty-something, creepy-looking house keeper dressed entirely in black."

"It was a Danverclone," I said. "There'll be more."

He clicked down the central locking and turned to stare at me. "You've really pissed someone off good and proper, haven't you?"

"Not without good reason--Look out!"

He swerved again as another Danverclone bounced off the hood and stared at me in a very unnerving way as she flew past the window. I watched her cartwheel across the waves behind us. That was the thing about Danverclones.

They were wholly expendable.

A moment later a heavy thump on the roof shook the cab. I looked behind, but no one had fallen off, and then I heard a noise like an angle grinder from above. It was another Danverclone on the roof, and she was planning on getting in.

"This is too heavy for me," said the cabbie, whose sense of fair play was rapidly departing. "I've got a livelihood and a very expensive backstory to support."

"I'll buy you a fleet of new cabs," I told him somewhat urgently. "And Master Backstoryist Grnksghty is a personal friend of mine; he'll spin you a backstory of your choice."

Before the cabbie could answer, another Mrs. Danvers landed heavily on the hood near the radiator. She stared at us for a moment and then, by pushing her fingers into the steel bodywork, began to crawl up the hood toward us, lips pursed tightly, the slipstream flapping her clothes and tugging at her tightly combed black hair. She wore the same small dark glasses as the rest of them, but you didn't need to see her eyes to guess her murderous intent.

"I'm going to have to turn you in," said the cabbie as yet another Danverclone landed on the taxi with a crash that shattered the side window. She hung on to the roof trim and flapped around for a bit before finally getting a hold, and then, reaching in through the broken window, she fumbled for the door handle. I reached across, flicked off the lock and kicked the door open, dislodging the Danverclone, who seemed to hang in the air for a moment before a large wave caught her and she was left behind the rapidly moving taxi.

"I'm not sure I can help you any further," continued the cabbie. "This is some seriously bad shit you're gotten yourself into."

"I'm from the Outland," I told him as another two Danvers fell past, vainly flailing their arms as they attempted to catch hold of the taxi. "Ever wanted something Outlandish? I can get it for you."

"Anything?" asked the cabbie. There was a screech of metal from the roof as the Danverclone up there began to cut her way in. Sparks fell from the roof as the angle grinder bit into the metal.

"Anything!"

"Well, now," said the cabbie, ignoring still another Danvers, who landed on the one crawling up the hood. There was the sort of sound a squeaky toy makes when you sit on it heavily, and then they both bounced off and were gone. "What I'd really like," he continued, completely unfazed, "is an original Hoppity Hop."

It seemed an unusual request until you realized just how valuable Outlander memorabilia was. I'd once seen two generics almost kill each other over a traffic cone.

"Orange and with a face on the front?"

"Is there any other? You'll find a seat belt in the back." he said. "I suggest you use it."

I didn't even have time to search for it before he suddenly pointed the cab straight up and went into a vertical climb toward the clouds. He turned to look at me, raised his eyebrows and smiled. He thought it was something of a lark. I was...well, *concerned*. I looked behind me as the Mrs. Danvers fell from the roof along with the gasoline-driven grinder and tumbled in a spiraling manner toward the sea, which was now far below. A few moments later, we were enveloped by the soft grayness of the clouds, and almost immediately, but without any sensation of having righted ourselves, we left the cloud on an even keel and were moving slowly between a squadron of French sailing ships and a lone British one. That might have been nothing to worry about, except that they were both armed naval vessels and were firing salvos at one another, and every now and again a hot ball of iron would sail spectacularly close to the cab with a whizzing noise.

"I had that Admiral Hornblower in the back of my cab once," said the taxidriver, chatting amiably to me in that curious way cabbies do when they talk over their shoulder and look at the road at the same time. "What a gent. Tipped me a sovereign and then tried to press me into ser vice."

"Where are we?" I asked.

"C. S. Forester's *Ship of the Line*," replied the cabbie. "We'll hang a left after the HMS *Sutherland* and move through *The African Queen* to join the cross-Maritime thoroughfare at *The Old Man and the Sea*. Once there we'll double back through *The*

*Sea Wolf* and come out at *Moby-Dick*, which neatly sidesteps *Treasure Island*, as it's usually jammed at this hour."

"Wouldn't it be better to go via *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and hang a left at *Robinson Crusoe*?"

I could see him staring at me in the rearview mirror. "You want to try it that way?" he asked, annoyed that I might question his judgment."

"No," I replied hastily. "We'll do what you think best."

He seemed happier at this. "Okeydokey. Whereabouts in Longfellow were you wanting to go?"

"The Wreck of the *Hesperus*."

He turned around to stare at me. "*Hesperus*? You're one whole heap of trouble, lady. I'll drop you off at 'A Psalm of Life,' and you can walk from there."

I glared at him. "An original Hoppity Hop was it? *Boxed*?"

He sighed. It was a good deal, and he knew it.

"Okay," he said at last. "*Hesperus* it is."

We moved slowly past a small steam launch that was shooting some rapids on the Ulanga, and the cabbie spoke again. "So what's your story?"

"I was replaced by my written other self, who is rubber-stamping the CofG's most harebrained schemes with the woeful compliance of our prime minister back home. You've heard about *Pride and Prejudice* being serialized as a reality book show called *The Bennets*? That's what I'm trying to stop. You got a name?"

"Colin."

We fell silent for a moment as we followed the Ulanga down-river to where it joined the Bora and then into the lake, where the gunboat *Konigin Luise* lay at anchor. I busied myself reloading my pistol and checking the last two eraserheads. I even took the pistol's holster and clipped it to my belt. I didn't like these things, but I was going to be prepared. Mind you, if they decided to send in the clones, I'd be in serious shit. There were seven thousand Danvers and only one of me. I'd have to erase over three thousand per cartridge, and I didn't think they'd all gather themselves in a convenient heap for me. I pulled out my cell phone and stared at it. We were in full signal, but they'd have a trace on me for sure.

"Use mine," said Colin, who'd been watching me. He passed his footnoterphone back to me, and I called Bradshaw.

"Commander? It's Thursday."

4

"I'm in a taxi heading toward *Moby-Dick* via *The Old Man and the Sea*."

5

"Apparently not. How are things?"

6

"No; I've got to destroy something in *Hesperus* that will hopefully raise the Outlander ReadRates. As soon as I'm done there, I'll go straight to Jobsworth."

7

I looked out of the window. We were over the sea once again, but this time the weather was brighter. Two small whaling boats, each with five men at the oars, were pulling toward a disturbance in the water, and as I watched, a mighty, gray-white bulk erupted from beneath the green water and shattered one of the small boats, pitching the hapless occupants into the sea.

"I'm just coming out the far end of *Moby-Dick*. Do you have anything for me at all?"

8

I closed the phone and handed it back. If Bradshaw was short on ideas, the situation was more hopeless than I had imagined. We crossed from Maritime to Poetry by way of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and after hiding momentarily in the waste of wild dunes, marram and sand of "False Dawn" while a foot patrol of Danvers moved past, we were off again and turned into Longfellow by way of "The Light house."

"Hold up a moment," I said to Colin, and we pulled up beneath a rocky ledge on a limestone spur that led out in the deep purple of the twilight to a light house, its beam a sudden radiance of light that swept around the bay.

"This isn't a wait-and-return job, is it?" he asked nervously.

"I'm afraid it is. How close can you get me to the actual wrecking of the *Hesperus*?"

He sucked in air through his teeth and scratched his nose. "During the gale itself, not close at all. The reef of Norman's Woe during the storm is not somewhere you'd like to be. Forget the wind and the rain--it's the cold."

I knew what he meant. Poetry was an emotional roller coaster of a form that could heighten the senses almost beyond straining. The sun was always brighter, the skies bluer, and forests steamed six times as much after a summer shower and felt twelve times earthier. Love was ten times stronger, and happiness, hope and charity rose to a level that made your head spin with giddy well-being. On the other side of the coin, it also made the darker side of existence twenty times worse--tragedy and despair were bleaker, more malevolent. As the saying goes, "They don't do nuffing by half measures down at Poetry."

"So how close?" I asked.

"Daybreak, three verses from the end."

"Okay," I said, "let's do it."

He released the handbrake and motored slowly forward. The light moved from twilight to dawn as we entered "The Wreck of the *Hesperus*." The sky was still leaden, and a stiff wind scoured the foreshore, even though the worst of the storm had passed. The taxi drew to a halt on the sea beach, and I opened the door and stepped out. I suddenly felt a feeling of strong loss and despair, but knowing full well that these were simply emotions seeping out of the overcharged fabric of the poem, I attempted to give it no heed. Colin got out as well, and we exchanged nervous looks. The sea beach was littered with the wreckage of the *Hesperus*, reduced to little more than matchwood by the gale. I pulled my jacket collar close against the wind and trudged up the shoreline.

"What are we looking for?" asked Colin, who had joined me.

"Remains of a yellow tour bus," I said, "or a tasteless blue jacket with large checks."

"Nothing too specific, then?"

Most of the flotsam was wood, barrels, ropes and the odd personal artifact. We came across a drowned sailor, but he wasn't someone from the *Rover*. Colin became emotional over the loss of life and lamented how the sailor had been "sorely taken from the bosom of his family" and "given his soul to the storm" before I told him to pull himself together. We reached some rocks and chanced across a fisherman, staring with a numbed expression at a section of mast that gently rose and



fell in the sheltered water of an inlet. Lashed to the mast was a body. Her long brown hair was floating like seaweed, and the intense cold had frozen her features in the expression she'd last worn in life--of abject terror. She was wearing a heavy seaman's coat, which hadn't done much good, and I waded into the icy water to look closer. Ordinarily I wouldn't have, but something was *wrong*. This should have been the body of a young girl--the skipper's daughter. But it wasn't. It was a middle-aged woman. It was Wirthlass-Schitt. Her eyelashes were encrusted with frozen salt, and she stared blankly out at the world, her face suffused with fear.

"She saved me."

It was a little girl's voice, and I turned. She was aged no more than nine and was wrapped in a Goliath-issue down jacket. She looked confused, as well she might; she hadn't survived the storm for over 163 years. Wirthlass-Schitt had underestimated the power not only of the BookWorld, the raw energy of Poetry...but also *herself*. Despite her primary goal of corporate duty, she couldn't leave a child to drown. She'd done what she thought was right and suffered the consequences. It was what I was trying to warn her about. The thing you discover in Poetry...is your *true* personality. The annoying thing was, she'd done it all for nothing. A cleanup gang from Jurisdiction would be down later, putting everything chillingly to rights. It was why I didn't like to do "the rhyming stuff."

Colin, overcome by the heavy emotions that pervaded the air like fog, had begun to cry. "O wearisome world!" he sobbed.

I checked Anne's collar and found a small necklace on her cold flesh. I pulled it off and then stopped. If she'd been on the *Hesperus*, perhaps she had picked up his jacket?

The seaman's coat was like cardboard, and I eased it open at the collar to look beneath. My heart fell. She wasn't wearing the jacket, and after checking her pockets I found that she wasn't carrying the recipe either. I took a deep breath, and my emotions, enhanced by the poem, suddenly fell to rock bottom. Wirthlass-Schitt must have given the jacket to her crewmates--and if it was back at Goliath, I'd have a snowball's chance in hell of getting to it. Friday had entrusted me with

the protection of the Long Now, and I had failed him. I waded back to shore and started sniffing as large, salty tears ran down my face.

"Oh, *please* dry up," I said to Colin, who was sobbing into his hankie next to me. "You've got me started now."

"But the sadness drapes heavily on my countenance!" he whimpered.

We sat on the foreshore next to the fisherman, who was still looking aghast, and sobbed quietly as though our hearts would break. The young girl came and sat down next to me. She patted my hand reassuringly.

"I didn't *want* to be rescued anyway," she announced. "If I survive, the whole point of the poem is lost--Henry will be *furious*."

"Don't worry," I said. "It'll all be repaired."

"And everyone keeps on giving me their jackets," she continued in a huffy tone. "Honestly, it gets harder and harder to freeze to death these days. There's this one that Anne gave me," she added, thumbing the thick pile on the blue Goliath jacket, "and the one the old man gave me seventeen years ago."

"Really, I'm not interested in--"

I stopped sobbing as a bright shaft of sunlight cut through the storm clouds of my melancholia.

"Do...you still have it?"

"Of course!"

And she unzipped the Goliath jacket to reveal--a man's blue jacket in large checks. Never had I been happier to see a more tasteless garment. I quickly rummaged through the pockets and found a yo-yo string, a very old bag of jelly beans, a domino, a screwdriver, an invention for cooking the perfect hard-boiled egg and...wrapped in a plastic freezer bag, a paper napkin with a simple equation written upon it. I gave the young girl a hug, my feeling of elation quadrupled by the magnifying effect of Poetry. I breathed a sigh of relief. *Found!* Without wasting a moment, I tore the recipe into small pieces and ate them.

"Riublf," I said to Colin with my mouth full, "leb's get goinf."

"I don't think we're going anywhere, Ms. Next."

I looked up and saw what he meant. Occupying every square inch of space--on the sea beach, the foreshore, the dunes and even standing in the sea--were hundreds upon hundreds of identical black-clad Mrs. Danvers, staring at me malevolently. We'd killed five of their number recently, so I guessed they wouldn't be that pleased. Mind you, they were always pretty miserable, so it might have had nothing to do with it. I instinctively grasped the butt of my pistol, but it was pointless--like using a peashooter against a T-54 battle tank.

"Well," I said, swallowing the last piece of the recipe and addressing the nearest Danverclone, "you'd better take me to your leader."

## The Bees, the Bees

The Danverclones had advanced a good deal since their accidental creation from the original Mrs. Danvers in *Rebecca*. At first, they had simply been creepy, fifty-something house keepers with bad attitude, but now they had weapons training as well. A standard Danverclone was a fearless yet generally vapid drone who would willingly die to follow orders. But just recently an elite force of Danverclones had arisen, with not only weaponry but a sound working knowledge of the BookWorld. Even I would think twice before tackling this bunch. We called them the SWOT team.

The Danverclones moved in silently. With bewildering speed and a tentacle-like movement of their bony limbs, four of them grasped my arms while another took my shoulder bag and a sixth removed my pistol. A seventh, who appeared to be the platoon commander, spoke briefly into a mobilefootnoterphone:

"Target Number One located and in custody."

She then snapped the phone shut and used a brief series of hand signals to the other Mrs. Danvers, who began to jump out of the poem, beginning with the ones right at the back. I looked across at Colin, who was also being held tightly. A Danverclone had pulled his taxi license from his wallet and held it up in front of him before tearing it in two and tossing the halves in the air. He glanced at me and looked severely annoyed, but not with me--more with the Danverclones and the circumstances. I was just wondering where they would take me when there was a faint crackle in the air and my recently appointed least-favorite person was standing right in front of me. She was dressed in all her black leather finery, twin automatics on her hips and a long black greatcoat that fell to the ground. She leered at me as she appeared, and I thought about spitting in her eye but decided against it--she

was too far away, and if I'd missed, I would just have looked even more enfeebled.

"Well, well," said Thursday1-4, "the great Thursday Next finally brought to book."

"Wow!" I replied. "Black is surely the color of choice today."

She ignored me and continued, "Do you know, it's going to be fun being you. Senator Jobsworth has extended me all the rights that are usually yours--you in the BookWorld, you at the CofG, you in the much-awaited and now greenlighted *Thursday Next Returns--This Time It's Personal* and you in the Outland. That's the bit I like best. As much Landen as I want." She leaned closer and lowered her voice. "And believe me, I want a *lot*."

I gave an almighty howl of anger and struggled to break loose from the Danvers, but without any luck. The clones all sniggered, and Thursday1-4 smiled unpleasantly.

"It's time for you to vanish, Thursday," she growled.

She tossed a pair of handcuffs to the Danvers, who pulled my arms behind my back and secured them. Thursday1-4 held on to me, took my shoulder bag from a nearby clone and began to walk away when the commander of the Mrs. Danvers contingent said, "I have orders to take her direct to the Ile Saint-Joseph within *Papillon* as per your original plan, Ms. Next1-4."

The other me turned to the Mrs. Danvers, looked her up and down and sneered, "You've done your job, Danny--you'll be rewarded. This is *my* prisoner."

But Mrs. Danvers had an order, and Danvers only do one thing: They do as they're told--and, until countermanded by a written order, they do it rather well.

"I have my *written* instructions," the clone said more firmly, and the other Danvers took a menacing step toward us, three of them producing weapons from within the folds of their black dresses.

"I'm countermanding your order."

"No," said Mrs. Danvers. "I have my orders, and I *will* carry them out."

"Listen here shitface," said Thursday1-4 with a snarl, "I'm the new Mrs. de Winter now--*geddit?*"

Mrs. Danvers took a step back in shocked amazement, and in that short moment Thursday1-4 held tightly to my arm and jumped us both out.

I was expecting a ready dug grave--or worse, a shovel and a place for *me* to dig one, but there wasn't. Instead the place where we'd arrived looked more like the sitting room of a Georgian country house of moderate means somewhere, and, thankfully, there wasn't a shovel in sight--but there was a Bradshaw, five Bennet sisters and Mr. Bennet, who were all staring at me expectantly, which was somewhat confusing.

"Ah!" said Bradshaw. "Thank goodness for that. Sorry to keep you in the dark, old girl, but I knew my footnoterphone was bugged. We've got to get you across to the CofG, but right now we have a serious and very pressing problem."

"O-kay," I said slowly and in great puzzlement. I looked across at Thursday who was rapidly divesting herself of the weapons and leather apparel.

"I actually *swore*," she muttered unhappily, holding one of the automatics with a disdainful finger and thumb. "And these clothes! Made from *animal skins*..."

My mouth may have dropped open at this. "Thursday5?" I mumbled. "That's *you*?"

She nodded shyly and shrugged. Underneath the leathers, I noticed, was her usual attire of naturally dyed cotton, crocheted sweater and Birkenstocks. She had taken her failure over the Minotaur to heart and made good. Perhaps I'd been too hasty over her assessment.

"We knew you were in the BookWorld, but then you disappeared off the radar," said Bradshaw. "Where have you been the past ten hours?"

"I was trapped in a moral dilemma. Any news from the Outland? I mean, are people buying into this whole reality book thing?"

"And how!" exclaimed Bradshaw. "The news from the CofG is that a half million people are waiting to see how *The Bennets* will turn out, as the idea of being able to change a major classic has huge appeal--it's the latest fad in the Outland, and you know how the Outlanders like fads."

"Sometimes I think they like little else."

Bradshaw looked at his watch. "There's only six minutes before *Pride and Prejudice* as we know it is going to be rewritten and lost forever, and we don't have a seriously good plan of action. In fact," he added, "we don't have *any* plan of action."

Everyone stared at me. Twenty seconds ago I thought I was almost certainly dead; now I was expected at short notice to fashion a plan of infinite subtlety to save one of our greatest novels from being reduced to a mind-numbing morass of transient popular entertainment.

"Right," I said as I attempted to gather my thoughts. "Lizzie?"

"Here, ma'am," said the second-eldest Bennet sister, bobbing respectfully.

"Fill me in. How does this reality-book thing work? Have you been given any instructions?"

"We've not been told much, ma'am. We are expected to collect ourselves in the house, but instead of looking for husbands and happiness, we are to undertake a preset task of an altogether *curious* nature. And as we do so," she added sorrowfully, "our new actions and words are indelibly burned into the new edition of our book."

I looked around the room. They were *still* all staring at me expectantly.

"Let me see the task."

She handed me a sheet of paper. It was on Interactive Book Council letterhead and read:

## TASK ONE

Chapters 1 to 3 (one hour's reading time)

*All House mates*

*Must*

*Participate*

The house mates will gather in the parlor of Longbourn and make bee costumes. After that, the house mates will be expected to act like bees. One of the house mates, dressed as a bee, will ask Mr. Bingley to organize a fancy-dress costume ball where everyone is required to dress as a bee. The house mate who is judged to have made the

best bee costume and to have done the most satisfactory bee impersonation will win the first round and be allowed to put up two house mates for eviction. The voting Outlander public will decide who is to go. House mates will be expected to go to the diary room and talk about what ever comes into their heads, no matter how dreary.

I put down the sheet of paper. This was a good deal worse than I'd expected, and my expectations hadn't been high.

"I'm *not* dressing up as a bee," announced Mr. Bennet indignantly. "The very idea. You girls may indulge in such silliness, but *I* shall withdraw to my study."

"Father," said Lizzie, "remember we are doing this to ensure that the Outland ReadRates do not continue to fall in the precipitous manner that has marked their progress in recent years. It is a sacrifice, to be sure, but one that we should shoulder with determination and dignity--for the good of the BookWorld."

"I'll dress as a bee!" cried Lydia excitedly, jumping up and down.

"Me, too!" added Kitty. "I will be the finest bee in Meryton!"

"You shall not, for I shall!" returned Lydia, and they joined hands and danced around the room. I looked at Mary, who turned her eyes heavenward and returned to her book.

"Well," said Jane good-naturedly, "I shall dress as a bee if it is for the greater good--do you suppose Mr. Bingley will *also* be required to dress as a bee? And whether," she added somewhat daringly, "we might get to see each other again, as bees?"

"It doesn't state as such," replied Mr. Bennet, looking at the task again, "but I expect Mr. Bingley will be requested to make an idiot of himself in the fullness of time--and Darcy, too, I should wager."

"Where's Mrs. Bennet?" I asked, having not seen her since I'd arrived.

"We had to put poor Mama in the cupboard again," explained Lizzie, pointing at a large wardrobe, which Thursday5 opened to reveal that yes, Mrs. Bennet was indeed inside, stock-still and staring with blank eyes into the middle



distance.

"It calms her," explained Jane as Thursday<sup>5</sup> closed the wardrobe door again. "We have to commit dear Mama to the wardrobe quite often during the book."

"Yes," added Lizzie thoughtfully, "I fear she will not take to the bee task. While there are daughters unmarried, Mama has only one thing on her mind, and she is liable to get...agitated and cause a dreadful scene. Do you think that will spoil the task?"

"No," I said wearily. "The worse it gets, the better reality it is, if you see what I mean."

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Thursday, old girl," interrupted Bradshaw, who'd been staring at his watch, "how's this for a suggestion? Everyone hides so there's no book at all."

"Out of the question!" intoned Mr. Bennet. "I will not hide my family from view and skulk in my own home. No indeed. No matter how silly we may look, we shall be here in the front room when the new book begins."

"Wait a moment," I said. "This first section lasts an hour's reading time, yes?"

Lizzie nodded.

I took the piece of paper with the task written upon it and pulled a pen from my top pocket, put three broad lines through the task and started to write my own. When I had finished, I handed it to Lizzie, who looked at it thoughtfully and then passed it to her father.

"Oh, boo!" said Lydia, crossing her arms and jutting out a lip. "And I did so want to become a bee!"

"I'm going to read this out loud," announced Mr. Bennet, "since we must all, as a family, agree to undertake this new task--or not. He looked around at everyone, who all nodded their agreement, except Lydia and Kitty, who were poking each other, and Mrs. Bennet, who couldn't, as she was still "relaxing" in the closet.

"First Task. Chapters One to Three," he began. "Mr. Bennet, of Longbourn House in Meryton, should be encouraged by his wife to visit Mr. Bingley, who has taken up residence at nearby Netherfield Park. Mr. Bingley shall return the visit

without meeting the daughters, and a ball must take place. In this ball Mr. Bingley and Jane Bennet are to dance together. Mr. Darcy is also to attend, and he shall be considered rude, proud and aloof by Lizzie and the rest of the family. At the same time, we are to learn much of the Bennet marriage, and their daughters, and their prospects. The reading public can vote on whether Jane and Bingley are to dance a second time. Mrs. Bennet is free to do "her own thing" throughout."

Mr. Bennet stopped reading, gave a smile and looked around the room. "Well, my children?"

"It sounds like an *excellent* task," said Jane, clapping her hands together. "Lizzie?"

"I confess I cannot fault it."

"Then it is agreed," opined Mr. Bennet with a twinkle in his eye. "Truly an audacious plan--and it *might just work*. How long before we begin?"

"Forty-seven seconds," answered Bradshaw, consulting his pocketwatch.

"I don't understand," said Lydia. "This new task--isn't that what usually happens?"

"Duh," replied Kitty, making a face.

"Places, everyone," said Mr. Bennet, and they all obediently sat in their allotted chairs. "Lizzie, are you ready to narrate?"

"Yes, Father."

"Good. Mary, would you let Mrs. Bennet out of the cupboard? Then we can begin."

Myself, Thursday5 and Bradshaw scurried out into the corridor as Lizzie began the reality book show with words that rang like chimes, loud and clear in the canon of English literature:

"It is a truth universally acknowledged," we heard her say through the closed door, "that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."

"Thursday," said Bradshaw as he, Thursday5 and I walked to the entrance hall, "we've kept the book exactly as it is--but only until the Council of Genres and the Interactive Book people find out what we've done. And then they'll be down here in a flash!"

"I know," I replied, "so I haven't got much time to change the

CofG's mind over this interactivity nonsense. Stay here and try to stall them as long as possible. It's my guess they'll let this first task run its course and do the stupid bee thing for task two. Wish me luck."

"I do," said Bradshaw grimly, "and you're going to need it."

"Here," said Thursday5, handing me an emergency TravelBook and my bag. "You'll need these as much as luck."

I didn't waste a moment. I opened the TravelBook, read the required text and was soon back in the Great Library.

## Senator Jobsworth

Senatorial positions in the Council of Genres are generally pulled from the ranks of the individual book council members, who officiate on all internal book matters. They are usually minor characters with a lot of time on their hands, so aside from a few notable exceptions, the Council of Genres is populated entirely by unimaginative D-4s. They meddle, but they don't do it very well. It is one of the CofG's strengths.

I impatiently drummed my fingers on the wall of the elevator as I rose to the twenty-sixth floor of the Great Library and the Council of Genres. I checked in my bag and found I still had two eraserheads but wasn't sure if a show of force was the correct way to go about this. If what Bradshaw had said was true and Evil Thursday was commanding a legion of Danvers, I might not even have a chance to plead my own case, let alone *Pride and Prejudice's*.

I decided that the best course of action was simply to wing it and was just wondering how I should approach even this strategy when the elevator doors opened and I was confronted by *myself*, staring back at me from the corridor. The same jacket, the same hair, trousers, boots--everything except a black glove on her left hand, which covered the eraserhead wound, I imagined. Bradshaw was right--Thursday1-4 had divested herself of her own identity and taken mine--along with my standing, integrity and reputation--an awesome weapon for her to wield. Not only as the CofG's LBOCS and as a trusted member of Jurisfiction, but *everything*. Jobsworth, in all his dreary ignorance, probably thought that this *was* me, having undergone a bizarre and--to him--entirely fortuitous change of mind about policy directives.

We stared at each other for a moment, she with a sort of numbed look of disbelief, and I--I hoped--with the expression that a wife rightly reserves for someone who has slept with

her husband.

"Meddling fool!" she said at last, waving a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* that she'd been reading. "I can only think this is your doing. You may have won the first round, but it's merely a postponement--we'll have the reality book show back on track after the first three chapters have run their course!"

"I'm going to erase you," I said in a quiet voice, "and, what's more, *enjoy it*."

She stared at me with a vague look of triumph. "Then I was wrong," she replied. "We *are* alike."

I didn't have time to answer. She took to her heels and ran off down the corridor toward the debating chamber. I followed; if we were externally identical, then the first to plead her case to the CofG had a clear advantage.

Thinking about it later, the pair of us running hell for leather down the corridors must have been quite a sight, but probably not *that* unusual, given the somewhat curious nature of fiction. Annoyingly, we were evenly matched in speed and stamina, and her ten-foot head start was still there when we arrived at the main debating chamber's door two minutes and many startled CofG employees later. She had to slow down at the door, and as she did so, I made a flying tackle and grabbed her around the waist. Toppled by the momentum, the pair of us went sprawling headlong on the carpet, much to the astonishment of three heavily armed Danverclones who were just inside the door.

The strange thing about fighting with yourself is that not only are you of equal weight, strength and skill, but you both know all the same moves. After we had grappled and rolled around on the carpet for about five minutes and achieved nothing but a lot of grunting and strained muscles, my mind started to shift and think about other ways in which to win--something my opponent did at *exactly* the same moment--and we both switched tactics and went for each other's throats. The most this achieved was that Landen's birthday locket was torn off, something that drove me to a rage I never knew I had.

I knocked her hand away, rolled on top of her and punched her hard in the face. She went limp, and I climbed off,

breathing hard, picked up my bag and locket and turned to Jobsworth and the rest of the security council, who had come into the corridor to watch.

"Arrest her," I panted, wiping a small amount of blood from my lip, "and bind her well."

Jobsworth looked at me and the other Thursday, then beckoned to the Danverclones to do as I asked.

She was still groggy but seemed to regain enough consciousness to yell, "Wait, wait! She's not the real Thursday--I am!"

Jobsworth, Barksdale and Baxter all swiveled their heads to me, and even the Danverclones took notice. In the CofG, my veto counted for everything, and if there was any doubt at all over which was the correct Thursday, I had to quash it here and now.

"Want me to prove it?" I said. "Here it is: The interactive book project stops *now*."

Jobsworth's face fell. "Stop it? But you were all for it not less than an hour ago!"

"That wasn't me," I said, pointing an accusing finger at the disheveled and now-defeated Thursday, who was at that moment being cuffed by the Danverclones. "It was the *other* Thursday, the one from the crappy-as-hell TN series, who has been trying, for reasons of her own personal vindictiveness, to screw up everything I've worked so hard to achieve."

"She's lying!" said the other Thursday, who now had her arms secured behind her back and still seemed unsteady from when I'd hit her. "*She's* the ersatz Thursday--*I'm* the real one!"

"You want more proof?" I said. "Okay. I'm also reinforcing my veto on the insane decision to invade the Racy Novel genre. Diplomacy is the key. And I want all Jurisfiction agents released from their books and returned to work."

"But that was *your* idea!" muttered Jobsworth, who, poor fellow, was still confused. "You said there was a bad apple at Jurisfiction and you needed to flush it out!"

"Not me," I said. "Her. To keep me from returning. And if you need any more proof, here's the clincher: We're *not* going to have her reduced to text. She's going to spend the next two years contemplating her navel within the pages of *The Great*

*Samuel Pepys Fiasco*. She's smart and resourceful, so we'll keep her in isolation in case she wants to try to be me again, and if she even *attempts* to escape, she'll be reduced to text."

Jobsworth needed no further convincing.

"It shall be so," he said in a faintly pompous way, and the other Thursday was dragged off, still uselessly proclaiming her unbogusness.

I took a deep breath and sat down at my desk. I could feel a bruise coming up on the side of my neck and my knee hurt. I stretched my hand and rubbed it where I'd struck her.

"Well," said Baxter, "I can't say I'm glad you've decided against either invading Racy Novel or canceling the reality book shows, but I am a lot happier that you are the one making the wrong decisions, and not some poorly written wannabe. What the hell was she up to?"

"As you say. Just a jumped-up generic who wanted to be real. Better put a Textual Sieve Lockdown on *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco* both in and out--I don't want to even *entertain* the possibility of someone rescuing her."

Jobsworth nodded to one of his aides to do as I'd asked and also--very reluctantly--to put a halt to the interactivity project and the Racy Novel invasion plans.

"But look here," said Colonel Barksdale, who seemed to be somewhat miffed that he wasn't going to spearhead an invasion of Racy Novel, "we can't just ignore Speedy Muffler and those heathens."

"And we shan't," I replied. "After we have followed all possible diplomatic channels, *then* we'll have a look at other means of keeping them in check--and I rule out nothing."

Barksdale stared at me, unconvinced.

"Trust me," I said. "I'm Thursday Next. I know what I'm doing."

He seemed to find some solace in this--my name counted for a lot.

"Right," I said, "I'm bushed. I'm going to go home. We'll discuss things tomorrow, right?"

"Very well," replied Jobsworth stonily. "We can talk at length then about the falling ReadRates and what you intend to do about them."

I didn't reply and left his office. But instead of going back to Swindon, I took a walk in the corridors of power at the CofG. Everything was busy as usual, the debating chamber in full swing, and there was little--if any--evidence that we were no longer at war or rewriting the classics. I stopped by the large picture window that faced out onto the other towers. I'd never really looked out of here for any length of time before, but now, with time and the BookWorld as my servant, I stared out, musing upon the new responsibilities that I had and how I would exercise them first.

I was still undecided twenty minutes later when Bradshaw tapped me lightly on the shoulder. "Old girl?"

He startled me, and I looked around, took one glance at who was with him and drew my automatic.

"Whoa, whoa!" said Bradshaw hurriedly. "This is *Thursday5*."

"How do you know?" I barked, pointing my gun directly at her, my sensibilities keenly alert to any sort of look-alike subterfuge. "How do we know it isn't the evil bad Thursday back here in disguise or something?"

Bradshaw looked mildly shocked at my suggestion. "Because she's not left my side since we last saw you, old girl."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely! Here, I'll prove it." He turned to Thursday5. "What were the names of the von Trapp children in *The Sound of Music*?"

Thursday5 didn't pause for an instant and recited in one breath: "Kurt, Friedrich, Louisa, Brigitta, Marta, Gretl and Liesl."

"You see?"

"You're right," I said. "Only a total drip like Thursday5 would know *that*--or at least," I added hurriedly, "that's what Evil Thursday would think."

I clicked on the safety and lowered the gun.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's been a tough day, and my nerves are in shreds. I need to get home and have a long, hot bath and then a martini."

Thursday5 thought for a moment. "After you've drunk the long, hot bath," she observed, "you'll never have room for the martini."



"Say what?"

"Never mind."

"We just came to congratulate you," said Bradshaw, "on rereversing the vetoes. *Pride and Prejudice* is running precisely as it should, and without the Interactive Book Council idiots to set any new tasks, we're in the clear. The Bennets wanted me to send you their very best and to tell you to drop around for tea sometime."

"How very proper of them," I said absently, feeling a bit hot and bothered and wanting them to go away. "If there's nothing else...?"

"Not really," replied Bradshaw, "but we wondered: Why did you lock her up in *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco*?"

I shrugged. "Punishment to fit the crime, I guess. Are you questioning my judgment?"

"Of course not, old girl," replied Bradshaw genially, exchanging a glance with Thursday5.

"*that* explains why I can't get back in," murmured Thursday5 in dismay. "Is this permanent? I know my book's unreadable--but it's home."

"Listen," I said, rubbing my scalp, "that's your problem. Since when were you part of the decision-making process?"

Bradshaw's mobilefootnoterphone rang.

"Excuse me," he said, and wandered off to answer it.

"It's been a long day," murmured Thursday5, staring out the window at the view. "You must be tired. Do you want me to fetch you a chai?"

"No, I don't drink any of that rubbish. What were you saying about the hot bath and the martini again?"

She didn't have time to answer.

"That was Text Grand Central," said Bradshaw as he returned. "We've been getting some Major Narrative Flexations inside *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco*. It seems the entire first chapter has broken away from the rest of the book."

"What?"

"As I said. It's a good thing no one reads it these days. We've tracked Thursday to page two hundred and eight."

I took a deep breath and looked at Bradshaw and Thursday5 in turn. "This is unfinished business," I said quietly. "I'm going

to put an end to her once and for all."

They didn't try to argue with me. I should have killed her there and then in the corridor. What *was* I thinking of?

"The book's been two-way-sieved," said Bradshaw. "Call me when you're about to jump, and I'll get Text Grand Central to open you a portal. As soon as you're in, we'll close it down and you'll both be trapped. Do you have your mobilefootnoterphone?"

I nodded.

"Then call me when you're done. Use Mrs. Bradshaw's middle name so I know it's you and *really* you. Good luck."

I thanked them, and they walked off down the corridor before evaporating from view. I tried to calm my nerves and told myself that facing Thursday couldn't be *that* bad, but the consequences if I failed were high indeed. I took another deep breath, wiped my sweaty palms on my trousers, made the call to Bradshaw and jumped all the way to page 208 of *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco*.

## *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco*

The *real* adventure that came to be known as *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco* was my first proper sojourn into nonfiction, which was, as the title suggests, one of my more embarrassing failures. I don't really know why, but nothing ever went right. I tried to convey a sense of well-meaning optimism in the book where I was caught between two impossible situations, but it came across as mostly inept fumbling, with a lot of hugging and essential oils.

I came to earth in Swindon. Or at least, the *Fiasco* touchy-feely version of Swindon, which was sunny and blue-skied and every garden an annoying splash of bright primary colors that gave me a headache. The houses were perfect, the cars clean, and everything was insanely neat and orderly. I pulled out my automatic, removed the clip to check it, replaced it and released the safety. There would be no escape for her this time. I knew she was unarmed, but somehow that didn't fill me with such confidence; after all, she was almost infinitely resourceful. The thing was, so was *I*. After I'd killed her, I would just jump out and everything would be right--forever. I could reinstate the interactive book project before the readers had finished the first three chapters--then go to the Outland and savor the joys of Landen once more. Following that and after paying a small amount of lip service to diplomacy, I could also deploy two legions of Mrs. Danvers into Racy Novel. Who knows? I might even lead the attack myself. That, I had discovered, was the best thing about being Thursday Next--you could do anything you damn well pleased and no one would, could or dared oppose you. I had only two problems to deal with right now: disposing of the *real* Thursday Next and trying to figure out Mrs. Bradshaw's middle name, the code word to get out. I hadn't a clue--I'd never even met her.

I pulled the glove off my hand and looked at where the mottled flesh still showed signs of the eraserhead. I rubbed the itchy skin, then moved to the side of the street and walked toward where this version of Thursday's house was located. It was the same as the one that was burned down in the first chapter of my book, so I knew the way. But the strange thing was, the street was completely deserted. Nothing moved. Not a person, not a cat, squirrel--*nothing*. I stopped at a car that was abandoned in the street and looked in the open passenger door. The key was still in the ignition. Whoever had once populated this book had left--and in a hurry.

I carried on walking slowly down the road. That pompous fool Bradshaw had mentioned something about a chapter breaking away from the main book--perhaps that was where all the background characters were. But it didn't matter. Thursday was here now, and she was the one I was after. I reached the garden gate of Landen5's house and padded cautiously up the path, past the perfectly planted flowers and windows so clean and sparkly they almost weren't there. Holding my gun outstretched, I stepped quietly inside the house.

Thursday5's idea of home furnishing was different from mine and the real Thursday's. For a start, the floor covering was seagrass, and the curtains were an odiously old-fashioned tie-dye. I also noticed to my disgust that there were Tibetan mandalas in frames upon the wall and dream catchers hanging from the ceiling. I stepped closer to the pictures on the mantelpiece and found one of Thursday5 and Landen5 at Glastonbury. They had their faces painted as flowers and were grinning stupidly and hugging each other, with Pickwick5 sitting between them. It was quite sickeningly twee, to be honest.

"I would have done the same."

I turned. Thursday was leaning on the doorway that led through to the kitchen. It was an easy shot, but I didn't take it. I wanted to relish the moment.

"What would you have done the same?" I asked.

"I would have spared you, too. I'll admit it, your impersonation of me was about the most plausible I'll ever see.

I'm not sure there's anyone out there who would have spotted it. But I didn't think you could keep it up. The *real* you would soon bubble to the surface. Because, like it or not, you're not enough of me to carry it off. To be me you need the seventeen years of Jurisdiction experience--the sort of experience that means I can take on people like you and come out victorious."

I laughed at her presumption. "I think you overestimate your own abilities, Outlander. I'm the one holding the gun. Perhaps you're a little bit right, but I *can* and *will* be you, given time. Everything you have, everything you are. Your job, your family, your *husband*. I can go back to the Outland and take over from where you left off--and probably have a lot more fun doing it, too."

I pointed my gun at her and began to squeeze the trigger, then stopped. She didn't seem particularly troubled, and that worried me.

"Can you hear that?" she asked.

"Hear what?"

She cupped a hand to her ear. "That."

And now that she mentioned it, I *could* hear something. A soft thrumming noise that seemed to reverberate through the ground.

"What is it?" I asked, and was shocked to discover that my voice came out cracked and...afraid.

"Take a look for yourself," she said, pointing outside.

I wiped the sweat from my brow and backed out the door, still keeping my gun firmly trained on her. I ran down to the garden gate and looked up the street. The houses at the end of the road seemed to have lost definition and were being eaten away by a billowing cloud of sand.

"What the hell's that?" I snapped.

"You'd know," she replied quietly, "if only you'd gone to Jurisdiction classes instead of wasting your time on the shooting range."

I looked at the mailbox on the corner of the street, and it seemed to crumble to fragments in front of my eyes and then was taken up into the cloud of dust and debris that was being sucked into a vortex high above us. I pulled out my footnoterphone and frantically dialed Bradshaw's number.

"But you don't know Melanie Bradshaw's middle name," observed Thursday, "do you?"

I lowered the phone and stared at her uselessly. It was a setup. Thursday must have spoken to Bradshaw, and together they'd tricked me into coming here.

"It's *Jenny*," she added. "I named my second daughter after her. But it won't help you. I told Bradshaw not to lift the Textual Sieve on any account, password or not. As soon as you were inside and the generics were safely evacuated, he was instructed to begin...the *erasure* of the entire book."

"How did you contact him?" I asked.

"He contacted *me*," she replied. "Thursday5 suggested to Bradshaw that you might have pulled the same trick as she did. I couldn't get out, but we could trick you *in*."

She looked at her watch.

"And in another eight minutes, this book and everything in it--you included, will be gone."

I looked around and saw to my horror that the erasure had crept up without my noticing and was less than ten feet away--we were standing on the only piece of remaining land, a rough circle a hundred feet across containing only Landen's house and its neighbors. But they wouldn't stay for long, and even as I watched, the roofs were turning to dust and being whirled away, consumed by the erasure. The dull roar was increasing, and I had to raise my voice to be heard.

"But this will erase you, too!" I shouted.

"Maybe not--it depends on you."

She beckoned me back into the house as the garden gate turned to smoke and was carried away into the dust cloud. As soon as we were in the kitchen, she turned to me.

"You won't need that," she said, pointing at my gun. I fumbled the reholstering clumsily, and it fell to the floor with a clatter. I didn't stoop to pick it up. I looked out the window into the back garden. The shed and the apple tree had both gone, and the erasure was slowly eating its way across the lawn. The ceiling was starting to look blotchy, and as I watched, the front door turned to dust and was blown away in the wind.

"*Ballocks!*" I said, as realization suddenly dawned. Not that I

was going to be erased, no. It was the cold and sobering revelation that I wasn't nearly as smart as I thought I was. I'd met a foe immeasurably superior to me, and I would suffer the consequences of my own arrogance. The question was, would I give her the pleasure of knowing it? But on reflection she didn't want or need that sort of pleasure, and everything suddenly seemed that much more peaceful.

I said instead, "I'm truly flattered."

"Flattered?" she inquired. "About what?"

The ceiling departed in a cloud of swirling dust, and the walls started to erode downward with the pictures, mantel and furniture rapidly crumbling away to a fine debris that was sucked up into the whirlwind directly above us.

"I'm flattered," I repeated, "because you'd erase a whole book and give your own life just to be rid of me. I must have been a worthy adversary, right?"

She sensed my change of heart and gave me a faint smile.

"You almost defeated me," said Thursday, "and you still might. But if I *do* survive this," she added, "it is my gift to you."

The walls had almost gone, and the seagrass flooring was crumbling under my feet. Thursday opened a door in the kitchen, beyond which a concrete flight of steps led downward. She beckoned me to follow, and we trotted down into a spacious subterranean vault shaped like the inside of a barrel. Upon a large plinth, there were two prongs across which a weak spark occasionally fired. The noise of the wind had subdued, but I knew it was only a matter of time before the erasure reached us.

"This is the core-containment room," explained Thursday. "You'd know about that if you'd listened in class."

"How," I asked, "is your survival a gift to me?"

"That's easily explained," replied Thursday, removing some pieces of packing case from the wall to reveal a riveted iron hatch. "Behind there is the only method of escape--across the emptiness of the Nothing."

The inference wasn't lost on me. The Nothing didn't support textual life--I'd be stripped away to letters in an instant if I tried to escape across it. But Thursday wasn't text: She was

flesh and blood and *could* survive.

"I can't get out of here on my own," she added, "so I need your help."

I didn't understand to begin with. I frowned, and then it hit me. She wasn't offering me forgiveness, a second chance or rescue--I was far too bitter and twisted for that. No, she was offering me the one thing that I *would* never, *could* never have. She was offering me redemption. After all I'd done to her, all the things I'd *planned* to do, she was willing to risk her life to give me one small chance to atone. And what's more, *she knew I would take it*. She was right. We were more alike than I thought.

The roof fell away in patches as the erasure started to pull the containment room apart.

"What do I do?"

She indicated the twin latching mechanisms that were positioned eight feet apart. I held the handle and pulled it down on the count of three. The hatch sprung open, revealing an empty, black void.

"Thank you," she said as the erasure crept inexorably across the room. The sum total of the book was now a disk less than eight feet across, and we were in the middle of what looked like a swirling cloud of dirt and detritus, while all about us the wind nibbled away at the remaining fabric of the book, reducing it to undescriptive textdust.

"What will it be like?" I asked as Thursday peered out into the inky blackness.

"I can't tell you," she replied. "No one knows what happens after erasure."

I offered her my hand to shake. "If you ever turn this into one of your adventures," I asked, "will you make me at least vaguely sympathetic? I'd like to think there was a small amount of your humanity in me."

She took my hand and shook it. It was warmer than I'd imagined.

"I'm sorry about sleeping with your husband," I added as I felt the floor grow soft beneath my feet. "And I think this is yours."

And I gave her the locket that had come off when we fought.



As soon as Thursday1-4 returned my locket, I knew that she had finally learned something about me and, by reflection, *her*. She was lost and she knew it, so helping me open the hatch and handing over the locket could only be altruism--the first time she had acted thus and the last time she acted at all. I climbed partially out of the hatch into the Nothing. There was barely anything left of the book at all, just the vaguest crackle of its spark growing weaker and weaker. I was still holding Thursday1-4's hand as I saw her body start to break up, like sandstone eroded by wind. Her hair was being whipped by the currents of air, but she looked peaceful.

She smiled and said, "I just got it."

"Got what?"

"Something Thursday5 said about hot baths and a martini."

Her face started to break down, and I felt her hand crumble within mine like crusty, sun-baked sand. There was almost nothing left of *Fiasco* at all, and it was time to go.

She smiled again, and her face fell away into dust, her hand turned to sand in mine, and the spark crackled and went out. I let go and was--









The textual world that I had become so accustomed to returned with a strange wobbling sensation. I found myself in another core-containment room pretty much identical to the first--aside from the spark, which crackled twenty times more brightly as readers made their way through the book. I picked myself up, shut and secured the hatch and made my way up the steps and toward the exit, fastening the locket around my neck as I did so.

I couldn't really say I was saddened by Thursday1-4's loss, as she would almost certainly have killed me and done untold damage if she'd lived. But I couldn't help feeling a sense of guilt that I might have done more for her. After all, it wasn't strictly her fault--she'd been written that way. I sighed. She had found a little bit of me in her, but I knew there was some of her in me, too.

I cautiously opened the containment room door and peered out. I was in a collection of farm buildings constructed of red brick and in such a dilapidated state of disrepair it looked as if they were held together only by the moss in the brickwork and the lichen on the roof. I spotted Adam Lambsbreath through the kitchen window, where he was scraping ineffectually at the washing-up with a twig. I made the sign for a telephone through the window at him, and he pointed toward the woodshed across the yard. I ran across and pushed open the door.

There was something nasty sitting in the corner making odd slavering noises to itself, but I paid it no heed other than to reflect that Ada Doom had been right after all, and found the public footnoterphone that I needed. I dialed Bradshaw's number and waited impatiently for him to answer.

"It's me," I said. "Your plan worked: She's dust. I'm in *Cold Comfort Farm*, page sixty-eight. Can you bring a cab to pick me up? This is going to be one serious mother of a debrief."

## The End of Time

No one ever did find out who the members of the ChronoGuard Star Chamber were, nor what their relationship with the Goliath Corporation actually was. But it was noted that some investment opportunities taken by the multinational were so fortuitous and so prudent and so longsighted that they seemed statistically impossible. There were never any whistle-blowers, so the extent of any chronuption was never known, nor ever would be.

By the time I arrived back home, it was dark. Landen heard my key in the latch and met me in the hallway to give me a long hug, which I gratefully received--and returned.

"What's the news on the reality book show?"

"Canceled. Van de Poste has been on the TV and radio explaining that due to a technical error, the project has been shelved--and that the stupidity surplus would be discharged instead by reinvigorating the astronomically expensive and questionably useful Anti-Smite shield."

"And *Pride and Prejudice*?"

"Running exactly as it ever did. But here's the good bit: All the readers who bought copies of the book to see the Bennets dress up as bees continued reading to see if Lizzie and Jane would get their men and if Lydia would come to a sticky end. Naturally, all the new readers were delighted at what happened--so much so that people with the name of Wickham have had to go into hiding."

"Just like the old days," I said with a smile.

The passion for books was returning. I thought for a moment and walked over to the bookcase, pulled out my copy of *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco* and riffled through the pages. They were blank, every single one.

"How are Friday and the girls?" I asked, dropping the book into the wastepaper basket.



"Friday is out. The girls are in bed."

"And Pickwick?"

"Still bald and a bit dopey. So...you managed to do what you set out to do?"

"Yes," I said quietly, "and Land, I can't lie to you anymore. The Acme Carpets stuff is just a front."

"I know," he said softly. "You still do all that SpecOps work, don't you?"

"Yes. But, Land, that's a front, too."

He placed a hand on my cheek and stared into my eyes. "I know about Jurisdiction as well, Thurs."

I frowned. I hadn't expected this. "You knew? Since when?"

"Since about three days after you'd said you'd given it up."

I stared at him. "You *knew* I was lying to you all those years?"

"Pumpkin," he said as he gently ushered me into the house and closed the door behind us, "you do love me, don't you?"

"Yes, but--"

He put his finger to my lips. "Hang on a minute. I know you do, and I love it that you do. But if you care *too* much about upsetting me, then you won't do the things you have to do, and those things are important--not just to me but to *everyone*."

"Then...you're not cross I've been lying to you for fourteen years?"

"Thursday, you mean *everything* to me. Not just because you're cute, smart, funny and have a devastatingly good figure and boobs to die for, *but that you do right for right's sake*--it's what you are and what you do. Even if I never get my magnum opus published, I will still die secure in the knowledge that my time on this planet was well spent--giving support, love and security to someone who actually *makes a difference*."

"Oh, Land," I said, burying my head in his shoulder, "you're making me go all misty!"

And I hugged him again, while he rubbed my back and said that everything was all right. We stood like this for some time until I suddenly had a thought.

"Land," I said slowly, "*how* much do you know?"



"Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw tell me quite a lot, and Spike and Bowden often call to keep me updated."

"The rotten swines!" I said with a smile. "They're always telling me to spill the beans to you!"

"We *all* care about you, Thursday."

This was abundantly true, but I couldn't get Thursday1-4 and her brief sojourn to the real world out of my mind. "What about...*other* stuff?"

Landen knew exactly what I was talking about. "I only figured out she was the *written* Thursday when you came back upstairs."

"How?"

"Because it was only then I realized she hadn't been wearing the necklace I gave you for your birthday."

"Oh," I said, fingering the locket around my neck. There was silence for a moment as we both considered what had happened. Eventually I said, "But she was a terrible lay, right?"

"*Hopeless.*"

And we both laughed. We would never mention it again.

"Listen," said Landen, "there's someone to see you in the front room."

"Who?"

"Just go in. I'll make some tea."

I walked into the living room, where a tall man was standing at the mantel with his back to me, looking at the framed pictures of the family.

"That's us holidaying on the Isle of Skye," I said in a soft voice, "at the Old Man of Storr. Jenny's not there because she was in a huff and sat in the car, and you can just see Pickwick's head at the edge of the frame."

"I remember it well," he said, and turned to face me. It was Friday, of course. Not *my* Friday but his older self. He was about sixty, and handsome to boot. His hair was graying at the temples, and the smile wrinkles around his eyes made me think of Landen. He was wearing the pale blue uniform of the ChronoGuard, the shoulder emblazoned with the five gold pips of director-general. But it wasn't the day-to-day uniform, it was ceremonial dress. This was a special occasion.

"Hi, Mum."

"Hi, Sweetpea. So you *did* make it to director-general after all!"

He shrugged and smiled. "I did and I didn't. I'm here, but I can't be. It's like everything else that we've done in the past to change the present--we were definitely there, but we couldn't have been. The one thing you learn about the time business is that mutually opposing states can comfortably coexist."

"Like *Saturday Night Fever* being excellent and crap at the same time?"

"Kind of. When it comes to traveling about in the timestream, paradox is always a cozy bedfellow--you get used to living with it." He looked at his watch. "You destroyed the recipe, didn't you?"

"I ate it."

"Good. I've just come to tell you that with only twenty-three minutes to go until the End of Time and without the equation for unscrambling eggs, the Star Chamber has conceded that the continued existence of time travel is retrospectively insupportable. We're closing down the time engines right now. All operatives are being demobilized. Enloopment facilities are being emptied and places found for the inmates in conventional prisons."

"She was right after all," I said quietly.

"I'm sorry?"

"Aornis. I *did* get her out of the loop."

"We're making quite sure that all prisoners with 'special requirements' are being looked after properly, Mum."

"I hope so. What about the other inventions built using retro-deficit-engineering?"

"They'll stay. The microchip and Gravitube *will* be invented, so it's not a problem--but there won't be any new retro-deficit technologies. More important, the Standard History Eventline will stay as it was when we switch off the engines."

"None of the history-rolling-up-like-a-carpet, then?"

"Possibly--but not very likely."

"And Goliath gets to stay as it is?"

"I'm afraid so." He paused briefly, then sighed. "So many things I could have done, might have done, have done and haven't done. I'm going to miss it all."

He looked at me intently. This was my son, but it wasn't. It was him as he *might* have turned out but never would. I still loved him, but it was the only time in my life where I was glad to say good-bye.

"What about the Now?"

"It'll recover, given time. Keep people reading books, Mum; it helps to reinforce and strengthen the indefinable moment that anchors us in the here-and-now. Strive for the Long Now. It's the only thing that will save us. Well," he added with finality, giving me a kiss on the cheek, "I'll be going. I've got to do some paperwork before I switch off the last engine."

"What will happen to you?"

He smiled again. "The Friday *Last*? I wink out of existence. And do you know, I'm not bothered. I've no idea what the future will bring to the Friday *Present*, and that's a concept I'll gladly die for."

I felt tears come to my eyes, which was silly, really. This was only the possibility of Friday, not the actual one.

"Don't cry, Mum. I'll see you when I get up tomorrow--and you know I'm going to sleep in, right?"

He hugged me again, and in an instant he was gone. I wandered through to the kitchen and rested my hand on Landen's back as he poured some milk in my tea. We sat at the kitchen table until, untold trillions years in the future, time came to a halt. There was no erasure of history, no distant thunder, no "we interrupt this broadcast" on the wireless--nothing. The technology had gone for good and the ChronoGuard with it. Strictly speaking, neither of them had ever been. But as *our* Friday pointed out the following day, they *were* still there, echoes from the past that would make themselves known as anachronisms in ancient texts and artifacts that were out of place and out of time. The most celebrated of these would be the discovery of a fossilized 1956 Volkswagen Beetle preserved in Precambrian rock strata. In the glove box, they would find the remains of the following day's paper featuring the car's discovery--and a very worthwhile tip for the winner of the three-thirty at Kempton Park.

"Well, that's it," I said after we had waited for another five

minutes and found ourselves still in a state of pleasantly welcome existence. "The ChronoGuard has shut itself down, and time travel is as it should be: technically, logically and theoretically...*impossible*."

"Good thing, too," replied Landen. "It always made my head ache. In fact, I was thinking of doing a self-help book for SF novelists eager to write about time travel. It would consist of a single word: *Don't*."

I laughed, and we heard a key turn in the front door. It turned out to be Friday, and I recoiled in shock when he walked into the kitchen. He had short hair and was wearing a suit and tie.

As I stood there with my mouth open, he said, "Good evening, Mother. Good evening, Father. I trust I am not too late for some sustenance?"

"Oh, my God!" I cried in horror. "They *replaced* you!"

Neither Landen nor Friday could hold it in for long, and they both collapsed into a sea of giggles. He hadn't been replaced at all--he'd just had a haircut.

"Oh, very funny," I said, arms folded and severely unamused. "Next you'll be telling me Jenny is a mindworm or something."

"She is," said Landen, and it was my turn to burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of the suggestion. They didn't find it at all funny. Honestly, some people have no sense of humor.

## A Woman Named Thursday Next

The Special Operations Network was instigated to handle policing duties considered either too unusual or too specialized to be tackled by the regular force. There were thirty departments in all, starting at the more mundane Neighborly Disputes (SO-30) and going on to Literary Detectives (SO-27) and Art Crime (SO-24). Anything below SO-20 was restricted information, so what they got up to was anyone's guess. What is known is that the individual operatives themselves are slightly unbalanced. "If you want to be a SpecOp," the saying goes, "act kinda weird."

My father had a face that could stop a clock. I don't mean that he was ugly or anything; it was a phrase the ChronoGuard used to describe someone who had the power to reduce time to an ultra-slow trickle. Dad had been a Colonel in the ChronoGuard and kept his work very quiet. So quiet, in fact, that we didn't know he'd gone rogue at all until his timekeeping buddies raided our house one morning clutching a Seize & Eradication Order open-dated at both ends and demanded to know where and when he was. Dad has remained at liberty ever since; we learned from his subsequent visits that he regarded the whole ser vice as "morally and historically corrupt" and was fighting a one-man war against the bureaucrats within the Office for Special Stemporal Temp...Tability. *Temporal...Stempal...Special--*

"Why don't we just hold it right there?" I said before Thursday5 tied her tongue in knots.

"I'm sorry," she said with a sigh. "I think my biorhythms must be out of whack."

"Remember what we talked about?" I asked her, raising an eyebrow.

"Or perhaps it's just a tricky line to say. Here goes:

Special...Temporal...*Stability*. Got it!" She smiled proudly at her accomplishment. Then a stab of self-doubt crossed her face. "But aside from that, I'm doing okay, right?"

"You're doing fine."

We were standing in the opening chapter of *The Eyre Affair*, or at least the refurbished first chapter. Evil Thursday's erasure caused a few ruffled feathers at Text Grand Central, especially when Alice-PON-24330 said that while happy to keep the series running for the time being, she was not that keen about taking on the role permanently--what with all the sex, guns, swearing and stuff. There were talks of scrapping the series until I had a brain wave. With the erasure of *The Great Samuel Pepys Fiasco*, Thursday5 was now bookless and needed a place to live; *she* could take over. Clearly, there had to be a few changes--quite a lot actually--but I didn't mind; in fact, I welcomed it. I applied for a whole raft of internal plot adjustments, and Senator Jobsworth, still eager to make amends and keep his job after the reality book farrago, was only too happy to accede to my wishes--as long as I at least *tried* to make the series commercial.

"Can we get a move on?" asked Gerry, the first assistant imaginator. "If we don't get to the end of this chapter by lunchtime, we're going to get behind schedule for the scene at Gad's Hill tomorrow."

I left them to it and walked to the back of Stanford Brookes's cafe in London, faithfully re-created from my memory and the place where the new *Eyre Affair* starts, rather than at a burned-out house belonging to Landen, where, in point of fact, I didn't live for another two years. I watched as the imagimators, characters and technicians translated the story into storycode text to be uploaded to the engines at TGC--and eventually to replace the existing TN series. Perhaps, I mused to myself, life might be getting back to normal after all.

It had been a month since we'd erased *Pepys Fiasco*, and Racy Novel, despite all manner of threats, had to admit that dirty-bomb technology was still very much in the early stages, so Feminist and Ecclesiastical breathed a combined sigh of relief and returned to arguing with each other about the malecentricity of religion.

At the same time, the gentle elongation of the Now was beginning to take effect: The Read-O-Meter had been steadily clicking upward as ReadRates once again began to rise. In the Outland the reality TV craze was now fortunately on the wane--*Samaritan Kidney Swap* had so few viewers that by the second week they became desperate and threatened to shoot a puppy on live TV unless a million people phoned in. They had 2 million complaints and were closed down. Bowden and I visited Booktastic! a week ago to find they now had two entire sections of books because, as the manager explained, "there had been a sudden demand."

As part of the whole ChronoGuard decommissioning process, Dad had been reactualized from his state of quasi nonexistence and turned up at Mum's carrying a small suitcase and a bunch of flowers. We had a terrific reunion for him, and I invited Major Pickles along, who seemed to hit it off rather well with Aunt Polly.

On other matters, I traveled to Goliathopolis to meet with Jack Schitt and return his wife's necklace, with an explanation of what had happened to her on board the *Hesperus*. He took the jewelry and the details of her death in stony silence, thanked me and was gone. John Henry Goliath made no appearance, and I didn't tell anyone at Goliath that the *Austen Rover* was, as far as we knew, still adrift without power in intragenre space somewhere between Poetry and Maritime. I didn't know whether this was the end of the Book Project or not, but TGC was taking no chances and had erected a battery of Textual Sieves in the direction of the Outland and marked any potential transfictional incursions as "high priority."

I walked out of the cafe to where Isambard Kingdom Bunuel was waiting for me. We were standing in Hangar Three among the fabric of *Affair*, ready to be bolted in. Bunuel had already built a reasonable facsimile of Swindon that included my mum's house and the Literary Detectives' office, and he was just getting started on Thornfield Hall, Rochester's house.

"We've pensketched the real Thornfield," he explained, showing me some drawings for approval, "but we were kind of think-worthing how your Porsche was painted?"

"Do you know Escher's *Reptiles*?"

"Yes."

"It's like that--only in red, blue and green."

"How about the Prose Portal?"

I thought for a moment. "A sort of large leatherbound book covered in knobs, dials and knife switches."

He made a note. "And the unextincted Pickwick?"

"About so high and not very bright."

"Did you bring some snapimagery?"

I rummaged in my shoulder bag, brought out a wad of snaps and went through them.

"That's Pickers when she still had feathers. It's blurred because she blinked and fell over, but it's probably the best. And this is Landen, and that's Joffy, and that's Landen again just before his trousers caught fire--that was *hilarious*--and this is Mycroft and Polly. You don't need pictures of Friday, Tuesday or Jenny do you?"

"Only Friday birth-plus-two for *Something Rotten*."

"Here," I said, selecting one from the stack. "This was taken on his second birthday."

Bunuel recoiled in shock. "What's that strangeturbing stick-browny mass on his face? Some species of alien facehugger or somewhat?"

"No, no," I said hurriedly, "that's chocolate cake. He didn't master the fine art of cutlery until...well, he's yet to figure it out, actually."

"Can I temporown these?" asked Bunuel. "I'll have them snoodled up to St. Tabularasa's to see what they can do."

"Be my guest."

The book preproduction had been going on for about two weeks now, and as soon as Bunuel had constructed everything for *The Eyre Affair*, he could move on to the more complex build for *Lost in a Good Book*.

"Is there anything you'll be able to salvage from the old series?" I asked, always thinking economically.

"Indeedly-so," he answered. "Acheron Hades and all his heavisters can be brought across pretty much unaltered. Delamare, Hobbes, Felix7 and 8, Muller--a few different lines here and there and you'll never know the difference."

"You're right," I said slowly as an odd thought started to



germinate in my mind.

"A few of the other iddybiddyparts we can scavenge," added Bunuel, "but most of it will be a newbuild. The warmspect the Council of Genres holds for you is reflected in the high costcash."

"What was that?" I asked. "I was miles away."

"I was mouthsounding that the bud get for the new TN series--"

"I'm sorry," I replied in a distracted manner, "would you excuse me for a moment?"

I walked to where Colin was waiting for me in his brand-new taxi. Under the TransGenre Taxis logo, they had added "*By Appointment to Thursday Next*" in an elegant cursive font. I didn't ordinarily endorse anything, but they had told me I would always be 'priority one', so I figured it was worth it.

"Where to, Ms. Next?" he asked as I climbed in.

"Great Library, floor six."

"Righto."

He pulled off, braked abruptly as he nearly hit a shiny black Ford motorcar, yelled at the other driver, then accelerated rapidly toward the wall of the hangar that opened like a dark void in front of us.

"Thanks for the Hoppity Hop," he said as the hole closed behind us and we motored slowly past the almost limitless quantity of books in the Great Library. "I'll be dining out on that for months. Any chance you can get me a Lava Lite?"

"Not unless you save my life again."

I noted the alphabetically listed books on the shelves of the library and saw that we were getting close. "Just drop me past the next reading desk."

"Visiting Tom Jones?"

"No."

"*Bridget Jones*?"

"No. Just drop me about...*here*."

He stopped next to the bookcase, and I got out, told him he didn't need to wait and to put the fare on my account, and he vanished.

I was in the Great Library standing opposite the original Thursday Next series, the one kept going by Alice-PON-24330,

and I was here because of something Bunuel had said. Spike and I had never figured out how Felix8 had managed to escape, and since his skeletal remains were found up on the Savernake, Spike had suggested quite rightly that he had been not Felix8 but *Felix9*. But Spike could have been wrong. What if the Felix I had met was the *written* Felix8? It would explain how he had gotten out of the Weirdshitorium--he'd just melted back into his book.

I took a deep breath. I didn't want to go anywhere near the old TN series, but this begged further investigation. I picked up the first in the series and read myself inside.

Within a few moments, the Great Library was no more and I was instead aboard an airship floating high over the home counties. But this wasn't one of the small fifty-seaters that plied the skies these days; it was a "Hotel Class" leviathan, designed to roam the globe in style and opulence during the halcyon days of the airship. I was in what had once been the observation deck, but many of the Plexiglas windows had been lost, and the shabby craft rattled and creaked as its lumbering bulk pushed through the air. The icy slipstream blew into the belly of the craft where I stood and made me shiver, while the rush of air and incessant flap of loose fabric were a constant percussive accompaniment to the rhythmic growl of the eight engines. The aluminum latticework construction was apparent wherever I looked, and to my left a door gave access to a precipitous veranda where first-class passengers would once have had a unique bird's-eye view of the docking and landing procedure. In the real world, these monsters had been melted down into scrap long ago, the job of repeater stations for TV and wireless signals now taken over by pilotless drones in the upper atmosphere. But it was kind of nostalgic to see one again, even in this illusory form.

I wasn't in the main action, the "better dead than read" adage as important to me as to anyone else. The narrative was actually next door in the main dining room, where Thursday, a.k.a. Alice-PON-24330, was attempting to outwit Acheron Hades. This wasn't how it *really* happened, of course--Acheron's hideout had actually been in Merthyr Tydfil's abandoned Penderyn Hotel in the Socialist Republic of Wales.

It was dramatic license--and fairly bold dramatic license at that.

There was a burst of gunfire from next door, some shouting and then more shots. I positioned myself behind the door as Felix8 came running through the way he usually did, escaping from Bowden and myself once Acheron leaped into the pages of *Jane Eyre*. As soon as he was inside, he relaxed, since he was officially "out of the story." I saw him grin to himself and click on the safety of his machine pistol.

"Hello, Felix8."

He turned and stared at me. "Well, well," he said after a pause. "Will the real Thursday Next please stand up?"

"Just drop the gun."

"I'm not really violent," he said. "It's just the part I play. The real Felix8--now, that's someone you should keep an eye on."

"Drop the gun, Felix. I won't ask you again."

His eyes darted around the room, and I saw his hand tighten on the grip of his gun.

"Don't even *think* about it," I told him, pointing my pistol in his general direction. "This is loaded with eraserhead. Put the gun on the floor--but *really* slowly."

Felix8, fully aware of the destructive power of an eraserhead, gently laid his weapon on the ground, and I told him to kick it to one side.

"How did you get into the real world?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"You were in the *real* Swindon five weeks ago. Do you know the penalty for pagerunning?"

He said nothing.

"I'll remind you. It's erasure. And if you read the papers, you know that I'll erase a whole book if required."

"I've never been out of *The Eyre Affair*," he replied. "I'm just a C-3 generic trying to do my best in a lousy book."

"You're lying."

"That it's a lousy book?"

"You know what I mean. Keep your hands in the air."

I walked behind him and, jamming my pistol firmly against his back, searched his pockets. Given the obsession that members of the BookWorld held for the Outland, I reckoned it

was impossible that he'd been all the way to Swindon and not returned with a few Outlandish mementos to sell or barter. And so it proved. In one pocket I found a joke rubber chicken and a digital watch, in the other a packet of Cup-a-Soup and a Mars bar. I chucked them on the floor in front of him.

"Where did you get these, then?"

He was silent, and I backed off a few yards before telling him to turn slowly around and face me.

"Now," I said, "let's have some answers: You're too mediocre to have hatched this yourself, so you're working for someone. Who is it?"

Felix8 gave no answer, and the airship banked slightly as it made a trifling correction to its course. The aluminum-framed door to the exterior promenade walkway swung open and then clattered shut again. It was dusk, and two miles below, the small orange jewels that were the streetlights had begun to wink on.

"Okay," I said, "here's the deal: You tell me what you know and I'll let you go. Play the hard man and it's a one-way trip to the Text Sea. Understand?"

"I've only *eighteen* words and one scene," he said at last. "One lousy scene! Do you have any idea what that's like?"

"It's the hand you were dealt," I told him, "the job you do. You can't change that. Again: *Who sent you into the Outland to kill me?*"

He stared at me without emotion. "And I would have done it, too, if it wasn't for that idiot stalker. Mind you, Johnson blew it as well, so I'm in good company."

This was more worrying. "Mr. Johnson" was the pseudonym used by the Minotaur--and he'd referred to my murder as "a job," so this looked to be better organized than I'd thought.

"Who ordered my death? And why me?"

Felix8 smiled. "You *do* flatter yourself, Ms. Next. You're not the only one they want, you're not the only one they'll get. And now I shall take my leave of you."

He moved toward the exterior door that clattered in the breeze, opened it and stepped out onto the exterior promenade. I ran forward and yelled "Hold it!"--but it was too late. With a swing of his leg, Felix8 slipped neatly over the rail

and went tumbling off into space. I ran to the rail and looked down. Already he was a small figure spiraling slowly downward as the airship droned on. I felt a curious sickly feeling as he became nothing more than a small dot and then disappeared from view.

"Damn!" I shouted, and slapped the parapet with my palm. I took a deep breath, went inside out of the chill wind, pulled out my mobilefootnoterphone and pressed the speed-dial connection to the Cheshire Cat, who had assumed command of Text Grand Central.

1

"Chesh, it's Thursday."

2

"I've lost a C-3 generic Felix8 from page two hundred and seventy-eight of *The Eyre Affair*, ISBN 0-14-200180-5. I'm going to need an emergency replacement ASAP."

3

"No."

4

"Blast," I muttered. "Can you find out who's been dicking around with the Textual Sieves and get it lifted? I've no urge to hang around a cold airship for any longer than I have to."

5

I told him that I'd be fine if he'd just call me back when the sieve was lifted, then snapped the phone shut. I pulled my jacket up around my neck and stamped my feet to keep warm. I leaned against an aluminum girder and stared out at the mauve twilight, where even now I could see stars begin to appear. Felix8 would have hit the ground so hard his text would have fused with the surrounding description; when we found him, we'd have to cut him from the earth. Either way he'd not be doing any talking.

I started thinking of people who might want me to kill me but stopped counting when I reached sixty-seven. This would be harder than I thought. But...what did Felix8 say: that I shouldn't flatter myself...*it wasn't just me*? The more I thought about it, the stranger it seemed, until suddenly, with a flash of realization, I knew what was going on. Sherlock Holmes, Temperance Brennan, the Good Soldier Svejk and myself--kill us and you kill not *just* the individual, but the *series*. It seemed too bizarre to comprehend, but it had to be the truth--*there*

*was a serial killer loose in the BookWorld.*

I looked around the airship, and my heart fell. They'd tried to kill me twice already, and who was to say they wouldn't try again? And here I was, trapped ten thousand feet in the air by a Textual Sieve that no one had ordered, hanging beneath 20 million cubic feet of highly flammable hydrogen. I pulled out my cell phone and hurriedly redialed the cat.

6

"No questions, Chesh--I need a parachute and I need it *now*."

As if in answer, there was a bright flare from the rear of the airship as a small charge exploded in one of the gas cells. Within a second this had ignited the cell next to it, and I could see the bright flare arc out into the dusk; the airship quivered gently and started to drop at the stern as it lost lift.

"I need that parachute!" I yelled into my phone as a third gas cell erupted, vaporizing the fabric covering and sending a shower of sparks out either side of the craft. The tail-down attitude increased as the fourth gas cell erupted, followed quickly by the fifth and sixth, and I grabbed a handrail to steady myself.

"Goddamn it!" I yelled to no one in particular. "How hard can it be to get a parachute around here?!" The airship trembled again as another explosion ripped through the envelope, and with an unpleasant feeling of lightness I felt the craft very slowly begin to fall. As I looked down to see where we were heading and how fast, twelve parachutes of varying styles, colors and vintage appeared in front of me. I grabbed the most modern-looking, stepped into the leg straps and quickly pulled it onto my back as the ship was again rocked by a series of explosions. I clicked the catch on the front of the webbing and without even pausing for breath, leaped over the rail and out into the cold evening air. There was a sudden sense of rapid acceleration, and I tumbled for a while, eventually coming to rest on my back, the air rushing past me, flapping my clothes and tugging at my hair. Far above me the airship was now a chrysanthemum of fire that looked destructively elegant, and from even this distance I could feel the heat on my face. As the airship grew smaller, I snapped out of my reverie and looked for a toggle or something to deploy the chute. I found it across my chest and pulled as hard

as I could. Nothing happened for a moment, and I was just thinking that the chute had failed when there was a *whap* and a jerk as it opened. But before I had even *begun* to sigh with relief, there was a thump as I landed on the ground, bounced twice and ended up inside the lines and the canopy, which billowed around me. I scrambled clear, released the harness, pulled out my phone and pressed the speed dial for Bradshaw, running as fast as I could across the empty and undescribed land as the flaming hulk of the airship fell slowly and gracefully in the evening sky, the blackened skeleton of the stricken ship silhouetted dark against the orange fireball above it, an angry flaming mass that even now was beginning to spread to the fabric of the book, as the clouds and sky started to glow with the green iridescence of text before it spontaneously combusts.

"It's Thursday," I panted, running to get clear of the airship before it hit the ground, "and I think we've got a situation...."

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**The Paragon** tearooms exist in the same or greater splendor in which they are referred to in the pages of this novel. They can be found on the main street of Katoomba, in the Blue Mountain region of New South Wales, Australia, and no visit to the area would be complete without your attendance. Who knows--you may even see a giant hedgehog and a tyrannical leader of the known universe sharing a booth and discussing Irritable Vowel Syndrome in hushed tones.

*This novel was written in BOOK V8.3 and was sequenced using a Mark XXIV ImaginoTransferenceRecording Device. Harley Farley was the imaginator. Generics supplied and trained by St. Tabularasa's. Holes were filled by apprentices at the HoleSmiths' Guild, and echolocation and postcreative grammatization was*



*undertaken by Outland contractors at Hodder and Penguin.*

*The "Galactic Cleansing" policy carried out by Emperor Zhark is a personal vision of the emperor's, and its inclusion in this work does not constitute tacit approval by the author or the publisher for any such projects, howsoever conducted.*

Thursday Next will return in:

***The War of the Words***

*or*

***Last Among Prequels***

*or*

***Apocalypse Next***

*or*

***Dark Reading Matter***

*or*

***Paragraph Lost***

*or*

***Herrings Red***

*or*

***The Palimpsest of Dr. Caligari***

*or*

***The Legion of the Danvers***

*or*

***Some Other Title Entirely***

1. "Thursday Next!"

2. "Miss Next--hello? Testing testing. One, two, three."

3. "If you're busy, Ms. Next, we can talk later."

4. "The name is Snell, Akrid Snell. Who was that disturbingly attractive woman in the tight pink--"

5. "Really? Is she married?"

6. "Sorry. Should have said. I'm the defense attorney assigned to your case."



7. "Of course not! That's our defense strategy in a nutshell. You are *completely* innocent. If we can convince the examining magistrate we can probably get a postponement."

8. "Miss Next, I'm so sorry, I had to take a call. Portia again; she wanted to discuss the timing of her 'drop of blood' defense. Bit of a feisty one, that. Your hearing is next Thursday--so be prepared!"

9. "That's good, Thursday. Can I call you Thursday? Keep up that sort of wide-eyed innocent babe-in-the-woods stuff and we'll have you off the hook quicker than you can say verruca."

10. "I'll explain it all when we meet. Sorry to have to communicate with you in footnotes but I'm due in court in ten minutes. Don't speak *to anyone at all* about the case and I'll see you on Thursday, Thursday. That's quite funny, that. 'Thursday . . . Thursday.' Hmm. Maybe not. Got to go. Remember: Speak to *no one* about the case, and if you have a moment, see if you can find out anything about that Flakk girl's domestic arrangements. Well, chin-chin and toodle-pip."

1. "Thursday, for heaven's sake what have you done?!"

2. "I told you not to talk to anyone about your case!"

3. "How can I be expected to help you if you go and blab everything to the prosecution?"

4. "Why Hopkins, you idiot! You pretty much confessed there and then on your own doorstep. This is going to really screw things up for us. Don't speak to *anyone* about *anything*, for Christ's sake--do you want to spend the next thousand readings imprisoned in *Castle Doubting* or something?"



5. "No time. I'll speak to you before we go in to court. Remember: Don't talk to *anyone at all* about the case. By the way, did you manage to find anything out about that delightfully odd Flakk girlie?"

6. "Really? That is interesting news. Well, must dash. Pip pip."

1. "Miss Next? Havisham speaking!"

2. *"I hope you didn't say what I thought I heard you say!"*

3. "I am here, young lady, but I am *shocked* by your coarse language!"

4. "Really? Well, I will not hear it from my apprentices. But I forgive you, I suppose. I need you to attend to me right now. Norland Park, Chapter Five, paragraph one--you'll find it in the travelbook Mrs. Nakajima left for you."

1. "Loud and clear, whiskers pressed, fed and watered, boots on and laced, ready to--"

2. "Not yet--none of the names appear in the register of fictioneers-- I'm just going through the reams of unpublished characters from the Well of Lost Plots--it might take some time."



3. "I hope I'm mistaken but you've got the Questing Beast approaching from the southeast--one hundred yards and closing."

4."He's in *Middlemarch* at the moment. I'll try him on the footnoterphone--but you know how deaf he is."

5. "He's not answering. Do you know, this reminds me of the time the Demogorgon met Medusa in the 1923 Miss Loathsome competition--"

6. "Coming up!"

7. "Any second now, Tweedy."

1. ". . . This is WOLP-12 on the Well of Lost Plots' own footnoterphone station, transmitting live on the hour every hour to keep you up-to-date with news in the Fiction Factory . . ."

2. ". . . After the headlines you can hear our weekly documentary show *WellSpeak*, where today we will discuss hiding exposition; following that there will be a *WellNews* special on the launch of the new Book Operating System, UltraWord™, featuring a live studio debate with WordMaster Xavier Libris of Text Grand Central . . ."

3. ". . . here are the main points of the news. Prices of semicolons, plot devices, prologues and inciting incidents continued to fall yesterday, lopping twenty-eight points off the TomJones Index. The Council of Genres has announced the nominations for the 923rd annual BookWorld Awards; Heathcliff is once again to head the Most Troubled Romantic Lead category, for the seventy-eighth year running . . ."



4. ". . . A new epic poem is to be constructed for the first time in eighty-seven years. Title and subject to be announced, but pundits reckon that it's a pointless exercise: skills have all but died out. Next week will also see the launch of a new shopping chain offering off-the-peg narrative requisites. It will be called *Pret-a-Ecrire* . . ."

1. ". . . Visit Aaron's Assorted Alliteration Annex, the superior sellers of stressed-syllable or similar-sounding speech sequences since the sixteenth century. Stop soon and see us situated on floor sixteen, shelf six seventy-six . . ."

2. ". . . Visit Bill's Dictionorium for every word you'll ever need! From *be* to *antidisestablishmentarianism*, we have words to suit all your plotting needs--floor twelve, shelf seventy-eight . . ."

3. ". . . Soon to be launched: Ultra Word™--the ultimate reading experience. For *free* information on the very latest Book Operating System and how its new and improved features will enhance your new book, call Text Grand Central on freefootnoterphone/ultraword . . ."

4. ". . . Honest John's Prefeatured Character salesroom for all your character needs! Honest John has Generics grade A-6 to D-9. Top bargains this week: Mrs. Danvers, choice of three, unused. + + +Lady of Shallot cloned for unfinished remake; healthy A-6 in good condition. + + +Group of unruly C-5s suitable for any crowd scene--call for details. Listen to our full listings by polling on footnoterphone/honestjohn . . ."

1. "Vera Tushkevitch! Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I'm here. No need to shout. You will deafen me, I'm sure!"

"I don't trust these strange footnoterphone devices. I'm sure I'll catch some nasty proletarian disease. Where did we last meet? At that party with the Schuetzburgs? The one where they served Apples Benedict?"

"No, Sofya, my husband and I were not invited. He voted against Count Schuetzburg at the last election."

"Then it must have been at Bolshaia Marskaia with Princess Betsys. Whatever did happen to that Karenin girl, have you any idea?"

"Anna? Yes, indeed--but you must not tell a soul! Alexey Vronsky was smitten by her from the moment he saw her at the station."

"The station? Which station?"

"St. Petersburg; you remember when a guard fell beneath the train and was crushed?"

"Anna and Vronsky met *there*? How terribly unsophisticated!"

"There is more, my dear Sofya. Wait--the doorbell! I must leave you; not a word to anyone and I will call again soon!"

1. ". . . Special on at St. Tabularasa's Generic College--superior-quality Blocking Characters available now for instant location to your novel. From forbidding fathers to 'by the book' superior police officers, our high-quality Blockers will guarantee conflict from the simplest protagonist! Call freefoot-noterphone/St. Tabularasa's for more details . . ."

2. "Vera? Is that you? What a day! All noise and rain. Do please carry on about Anna!"

"Well, Anna danced with Vronsky at the ball that night; he became her shadow and very much more!"

"No! Alexey Vronsky and Anna--an *affair*! What about her husband? Surely he found out?"

"Eventually, yes. I think Anna told him, but not until she was with child, Vronsky's child. There was to be no hiding *that*."

"What did he say?"

"Believe it or not, he forgave them both! Insisted that they remain married and attempted to continue as if nothing had happened."

"I always did think that man was a fool. What happened next?"

"Vronsky shot himself, claiming he could not bear to be apart. Melodramatic is *not* the word for it!"

"It reads like a cheap novelette! Did he die?"

"No; merely wounded. It gets worse. Karenin realized that to save Anna he *himself* must take the disgrace and admit that he had been unfaithful so that Anna was not ruined and could marry Vronsky."

"So Karenin let them go? He didn't ban her from ever seeing her lover again? Didn't horsewhip either of them or sell his story to *The Mole*? It strikes me Karenin himself may have had some totty on the side, too. Wait! My husband calls me--stay tuned, farewell for now, my dear Vera!"



1. "Miss Next, are you there?"

2. "Good. Meet me at the Jurisdiction office as soon as possible. It's about Perkins--the Minotaur has escaped."

3. "Not really. You see, Perkins isn't responding to footnoterphone communications--we think something might have happened to him."

1. "Sofya! Where were you? I have been calling forever! Tell me, the Karenins--they divorced?"

"No! Maybe if they *had* been divorced, events would have been different. I remember her attending the theater in Petersburg. What a disaster!"

"Why? Whatever happened? Did she make a fool of herself?"

"Yes, by appearing in the first place! How could she? Madame Kartasova, who was in the adjacent box with that fat, bald husband of hers, made a scene. She said something aloud, something insulting, and left the theater. We all saw it happen. Anna tried to ignore everything but she must have known."

"Why didn't they push for a divorce, the foolish pair!"

"Vronsky wanted her to but she kept putting it off. They moved to Moscow, but she was never happy. Vronsky spent his time involved in politics and she was convinced that he was with other women. A jealous, fallen disgrace of a woman she was. Then, at Znamanka station she could take it no longer--she flung herself upon the rails and was crushed by the 20:02 to Obiralovka!"

"No!"

"Yes--but don't tell a soul--it is a secret between you and I! Come for dinner on Tuesday--we are having Turnips a l'Orange--I have a simply *adorable* new cook. Adieu, my good friend, adieu!"

1. "Thursday, are you there?"

2. "It's the Cheshire Cat. Do you know how to play the piano?"

3. "Oh, no reason; I just thought I'd ask to be on the safe side."

4. "Why the *piano*, of course!"



5. "You've got a hearing for your trial--remember the Fiction Infraction? Well, there have been some delays with Max De Winter's appeal, so they've applied for a continuance--can you come this afternoon if you're not too busy, say three o'clock?"

6. "*Alice in Wonderland*, just after the 'Alice's Evidence' chapter. The Gryphon will be representing you. Don't forget--three o'clock."

1. ". . . Dear Friend, I am a fifty-year-old lady from the Republic of Gondal. I got your details from the Council of Genres and decided to contact you to see if you could help. My husband, Reginald Jackson, was the rebel leader in *Gondal in Turmoil* (RRP: PS4.99), and just before he was assassinated, he gave me twelve million dollars and I departed the book to be a refugee in the Well of Lost Plots with my two children. On arrival, I decided to deposit this money in a security company for safekeeping. Right now, I am seeking assistance from you so that I can transfer the funds from the Well to your Outland account. If this offer meets your approval, you could reach me on my footnoterphone. Thank you, Mrs. R. Jackson . . ."

## 1. "Speaking!"

2. "I'm on it. How is she?"

3. "Okay. A cleanup gang of Danvers are on their way now."

1. The Jurisdiction office vanished and was replaced by a large and shiny underground tube. It was big enough to stand up in, but even so I had to keep pressed against the wall as a constant stream of words flashed past in both directions. Above us, another pipe was leading upwards, and every now and then a short stream of words were diverted into this small conduit.

"Where are we?" I asked, my voice echoing about the steel walls.

"Somewhere quite safe," replied Deane. "They'll be wondering where you went."

"We're in the Outland--I mean, home?"

Deane laughed. "No, silly, we're in the footnoterphone conduits."

I looked at the stream of messages again. "We are?"

"Sure."

"Come on, let me show you something."

We walked along the pipe until it opened out into a bigger room--a hub where messages went from one genre to another. The exits closest to me were marked *Crime*, *Romance*, *Thriller* and *Comedy*, but there were plenty more, all routing the footnoterphone messages towards some subgenre or other.

"It's incredible!" I breathed.

"Oh, this is just a small hub," replied Deane, "you should see the bigger ones. It all works on the ISBN number system, you know--and the best thing about it is that neither Text Grand Central nor the Council of Genres know that you can get down here. It's sanctuary, Thursday. Sanctuary away from the prying eyes of Jurisdiction and the rigidity of the narrative."

I caught his eye. "Tweed thinks you killed Perkins, Snell and that serving girl."

He stopped walking and sighed. "Tweed is working with Text Grand Central to make sure UltraWordTM is launched without any hitches. He knew I wanted to conduct more tests. He offered me a plot realignment in *The Squire of High Potternews* to 'garner my support.' "

"He tried to buy you?"

"When I refused, he threatened to kill me--that's why we escaped."

"We?"

"Of course. The maidservant that I ravage in chapter eight and then cruelly cast into the night. She dies of tuberculosis and I drink myself to death. Do you think we could allow that?"

"But isn't that what happens in most Farquitt novels? Maidservant ravaged by cruel squire?"

"You don't understand, Thursday. Mimi and I are in love."

"Ah!" I replied slowly, thinking of Landen. "That can change things."

"Come," said Deane, beckoning me through the hub and dodging the footnoterphone messages, "we have made our home in a disused branch line--after Woolf wrote *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, the Council of Genres thought Stream of Consciousness would be the next Detective--they built a large hub to support the rackloads of novels that never appeared."

We turned into a large tunnel about the size of the underground back in Swindon, and the messages whizzed back and forth, almost filling the tube to capacity.

After a few hundred yards we came to another hub and took the least used--barely two or three messages a minute buzzed languidly past, and these seemed to be lost; they moved around vaguely for a moment and then evaporated. The sides of the tube were less shiny, rubbish had collected at the bottom and water leaked in from the roof. Every now and then we passed small unused offshoots, built to support books that were planned but never written.

"Why did you come for me, Vern?"

"Because I don't believe you would kill Miss Havisham, and I love stories as much as anyone. UltraWordTM is flawed, and I'm not going to see it dominate the BookWorld if I can help it."

The tunnel opened out into a large chamber where a settlement of sorts had been built from rubbish and scrap wood--items that could be removed from the BookWorld without anyone noticing. The buildings were little more than tents with the orange flicker of oil lamps from within.

"Vern!" A dark-haired young woman waved at him from the nearest tent. She was heavily pregnant and Deane rushed up to hug her affectionately. I watched them with a certain degree of jealousy. I noticed I had placed my hand on my own tum quite subconsciously. I sighed and pushed it to the back of my mind.

"Mimi, this is Thursday," said Vern. I shook her hand and she led us into their tent, offering

me a small wooden box to sit on that I noticed had once been used to hold past tenses.

"So what's wrong with UltraWordTM?" I asked, my curiosity overcoming me.

"Flawed by the need for control," he said slowly. "Think the BookWorld is overregulated? Believe me, it's an anarchist's dreamworld compared to the future seen by TGC!"

And so, as quickly as possible, he told me exactly what he had discovered. The problem was, I needed something more than his theories. To do battle with Tweed and TGC, I needed *proof*.

"Proof," said Deane, "yes, that was always the problem. Let me show you what Perkins left us."

He returned with a birdcage containing a skylark and set it upon the table.

I looked at the bird and the bird looked back.

"This is the proof?"

"So Perkins said."

"Do you have any idea what he meant?"

"None at all." Deane sighed. "He was Minotaur shit long before he tried to explain it to any of us."

I leaned forward for a closer look and smelt--*cantaloupes*.

"It's UltraWordTM," I breathed.

"It is?" echoed Deane in surprise. "How can you tell?"

"It's an Outlander thing. I have a plan, but to do it I have to be at liberty--and free from the Bellman's suspicions."

"I can arrange that." Deane smiled. "Come on, let's do this thing before it gets any worse."



1. Mimi was standing outside the footnoterphone tube entrance to Text Grand Central and looking at her watch. The words sped backwards and forwards, darting inside the tunnel, which had a sturdy grate across it streaked with rust. Every now and then messages were deflected off. It was a textual sieve--used here for deleting unwanted junkfootnoterphone messages.

She gestured to the man accompanying her and stepped back.

Quasimodo--who had found sanctuary, finally--grunted in reply and gently placed *Das Kapital* next to *Mein Kampf*, separating them only by a thin metal sheet. The "book sandwich" was held together by rubber bands, and a string was attached to the metal sheet. Quasimodo tied the books to the grate, then retired down the conduit, paying out the string as he went. He joined Mimi at a little-used subgenre pipe entitled Squid Action/Adventure and waited for Thursday's signal.

2. Mimi nodded to Quasimodo, who pulled the string. The steel plate shot out and *Das Kapital* and *Mein Kampf* came together, their conflicting ideologies starting to generate heat. The books turned brown, smoldered for a moment and then, as Mimi and Quasimodo scurried away up their retreat, the two volumes reached critical mass, turned white-hot and exploded. The detonation echoed down the footnoterphone pipes, followed by a deathly silence. They had done it. The footnoterphone conduit was destroyed--Libris and Tweed were cut off from Text Grand Central.

1. "Thursday! It's Mimi, are you there?"

2. "They are rerouting messages through the auxiliary ducts past Spy Thrillers and through Horror. If you haven't got a vote, get one now!"

"Oh, how I wish my worthless body would melt into a liquid and then evaporate."

"Or that God had not decreed suicide a complete no-no."

"Oh God, oh God! How tired, stale and boring life seems to me."

"Oh, damn and double blast! I feel like a garden that's been left to seed and has been overtaken by all those really annoying weeds, like Japanese knotweed or nettles, both of which can be destroyed by using a recommended herbicide, available from Jekyll Garden Centres." *Footnoterphone Simultaneous Translation sponsored by Jekyll Garden Centres.*



1 "Goodness! Already?"

2 "This is really awkward. Jobsworth just called--he's overjoyed that you're taking Thursday and said that if we do a *really* good job, he would give Jurisfiction's extra funding his special attention."

3 "Bundles, old girl. Do this as a favor to old Bradders, eh? Just until the end of the day."

1 ffffffgghuhfdfffffggggooonpicUp...pass1ccccwww.

2 kkkkkcar45kAR45% % % %bloody hellfire! > > > > > sodding jjjjjjjjjj Bureaucrats even out here + eeee.

3 jjjjjjjahagssfffffssss-Is anyone out there? All I ddddddd can see is endless BLEEDING ocean-/////////.

4 "Thursday! Great Scott, girl! Where are you?"

5 "Wouldn't it be better to go via *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and hang a left at *Robinson Crusoe*?"



6 "Not good. Can you get up to the CofG straightaway?"

7 "Good luck, old girl. You'll need it. Where are you now?"

8 "Not a thing. I'm under house arrest. You're all alone on this one, Thursday. Best of British and all that."

1 *"Prego! Il Gatto del Cheshire."*

2 "Sorry--just practicing for my holidays in Brindisi this year. What can I do for you?"

3 "Sure. Say, did you order a Textual Sieve Lockdown on *The Eyre Affair*?"

4 "Well, you've got one. Mesh is set to ultrafine and timelocked--not even a period is going to get out of that book for at least twenty minutes."

5 "No *problems*, Outlander *amiga*. Do you want me to keep you company?"



